

Ties of Love

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I

‘I told you the first time you came here, your sister died of pneumonia and the brat of a brother up and ran away.’

‘I can’t believe . . .’

‘Who gives a damn whether you believe!’ Uriah Buckley slammed a closed fist against a glass-fronted bookcase, shattering several small diamond-shaped panes, and as the shards fell about his feet rounded on the young woman he had kept standing before his large ornate walnut desk. ‘What difference does your believing or not believing make?’ He snarled. ‘*I* say it were sickness of the lungs, *I* say it and what Uriah Buckley says be what matters and not what you believes.’

Nerves fluttering like falling leaves, Amber Neale stared calmly at the red angry face.

‘No,’ she said quietly. ‘That is not all which matters. My brother was no more than a child when I left him and my sister in the care of this house and though he was no doubt heartbroken at the death of Bethany he was no coward; Denny would never have run away, he would have waited for my return.’

Across the desk heavy-lidded eyes glinted cold and

menacing as dark ice, thin lips drawing back in a vulpine snarl; the voice which a second before had been loud and harsh fell to a sibilant hiss. 'Are you calling me a liar?'

Was she? Amber's heart somersaulted in her chest. Was she calling him a liar? Uriah Buckley was a powerful man in Darlaston, powerful enough to reduce her life to ashes, to make it so it wasn't worth living should she cross him; but then Bethany, that beautiful wide-eyed ten-year-old girl, was not living and it appeared the Lord alone knew whether Denny lived or not. But the Lord was not alone in that knowledge, every fibre of her body, every beat of her heart told her so, told her the man glaring at her also knew.

Breath quivering in her chest, Amber met the venom poisoning that remorseless gaze, her veins throbbing as if the fangs of death had already bitten into them. She should leave now, go before she angered this man further; but even as the warning sounded in her brain she answered quietly.

'Yes . . . yes, I am calling you a liar!'

Candles and oil lamp forgotten and unlit Amber Neale sat staring into the darkness of her bedroom. Why had she agreed to go, why had she agreed to leave her brother and her sister and why had she trusted Uriah Buckley?

Across the deep silence of night the past reached out, touching her, drawing her back into itself, whispering of things she could not change.

'*Don't go please . . .*' The frightened words of a ten-

year-old girl cried in her soul. *'Don't leave Denny and me. I don't like this house, it fears me.'*

She had laughed at that. Trembling now with the memory she could almost feel the thin shaking body of her sister as she had gathered her in her arms.

Had they not been comfortable here at Bescot Lodge? She had said, stroking that almost golden hair. Hadn't they got food and a warm bed, were not the other servants friendly to them, hadn't they been kind? There was no need to be fearful; within a year, likely less, she would be back and the three of them would be together as they had always been.

A year! Amber felt the air choke in her throat. If only that was all it had been!

She had assured them both constantly through the month of preparations. It was a big step from upstairs maid to becoming the personal maid of Joanna Buckley, the granddaughter of the master of Bescot Lodge; it would mean a rise in salary, maybe even twelve pounds a year, think how they could live on that. But all her comforting had made no impact on Bethany's fear and the dread which showed in her lovely golden eyes grew more visible with every passing day.

Why had she not heeded that fear? Fingers twisting together, she stared into the darkness. Why had she not refused to accompany Joanna Buckley on that journey? The answer to that was simple, easier to understand than was the reason for her sister's distress. To say no would be to forfeit her place at Bescot Lodge, to be put out on the streets with a

younger brother and sister to care for. There were no relatives to whom she could turn for assistance, no place she could find them shelter . . . hard as the decision to leave them was it was not possible to tell the master he must find some other person to travel with his granddaughter.

Joanna had returned from finishing school less than two months when the letter arrived. The girl had been so excited, dancing and whirling about the huge bedroom flinging gowns and lingerie onto the ornate four-poster bed, blue eyes glistening and fair hair flowing out like a gauze mantle from her shoulders. Her parents had sent for her; she had sung the words, her clear voice sending them ringing around the room: they wanted her to join them to India.

'Think of it,' she had trilled, 'all those handsome officers in their regimental uniforms, afternoon teas on the terrace and those wonderful balls . . . Oh Amber, won't it be absolutely perfect!'

Absolutely perfect. Tears squeezing onto her cheeks, Amber let the past replay. That was how it had seemed, but only for Joanna Buckley. She had thrown herself into a mad round of fittings for morning dresses, afternoon tea gowns, ball gowns that were clouds of pink, white, lemon, blue . . . a rainbow of delicate silks, lace and tulle; dressmakers coming and going like so many twittering sparrows. Then of course she had needed bonnets, and this had meant hours at milliners' shops followed by visits to the glovemaker, bootmaker and of course a parasol-maker. It had left her exhausted but whilst the

granddaughter of the house had flopped onto her bed with a refreshing tray of tea to rest and restore her strength in time for dinner, she, the lady's maid, had to carry on with her duties.

But all of this would not have been nearly so hard had it not been for the increasing fears of her sister. Every night as she plaited the child's hair for bed came the same heartrending plea, *'Don't go, Amber, don't leave Denny an' me alone, I be feared of this house.'*

She had not thought to ask why Bethany was so afraid.

'Why did I not ask?' Fingers twisted so tightly they ached, Amber left the thought whisper into the darkness. 'Oh my God, why did I not ask?'

There had been no sound of footsteps; only the delicate perfume accompanying the slight figure of the Indian girl betrayed her presence. Now she moved closer, a gentle hand reaching to those of Amber knitted together in her lap.

'You have been there again, you have been to the house of him who was once your master?'

'Yes.' Amber's answer was a murmur in her throat.

'But you have learned no more of your sister and brother?'

'He told me only what he said on my first visit, that Bethany had been taken with a summer chill which had rapidly turned to pneumonia and that Denny had run away the day she was buried and had not been seen at Bescot Lodge since.'

'But that is not what you believe?'

No, she did not believe the words of Uriah Buckley. He had looked directly into her eyes as he had spoken them but beneath that ice-bound menace something else had gleamed. She had been shown into his study to be kept standing throughout the brief moments he had suffered her to stay and not in any one of those moments had he expressed regret for her loss nor shown an atom of sympathy for the child who had died beneath his roof. No, there had been no word of condolence, no sign of compassion, but behind the venom spitting from that cold glare, despite the threat in the demand hurled across the desk, she had seen the shadow flit across his eyes, seen the quick working of that thin mouth.

Uriah Buckley had shown no sign of pity for her sister or concern for her brother; contempt and intimidation had been his answer to her questions but underlying that had been that something else, something his anger could not hide or the malevolence of his glare disguise; the something she now recognised. Uriah Buckley was a man in fear! Was it a shadow of his past? And was that shadow cast by her brother and sister?

Movements as sure in the half-light as in daytime, the girl crossed the room to light the lamp and as the lambent glow filtered through the shadows turned to look at the seated figure of the young woman who had saved her life, a life she would gladly give now if it would lift the sorrow from those shoulders, wipe the sadness from that pale face. But it would not; she could only try to give comfort.

‘You have seen where she who was your sister lies, the words on the stone that covers her; do they not say, as he did, that she died of pneumonia? The Church of your faith, would it permit a lie, would it allow a non-truth?’ Soft cloth whispered with each movement as the slight figure returned to kneel beside Amber’s chair. ‘Man and stone say the same thing so why do you not believe?’

She could not give voice to the doubt inside, she could not put reason to the feeling; she only knew its certainty.

‘Stone cannot lie.’ Amber’s eyes closed but opened quickly against the sight of eyes that could have been chiselled from ice. ‘But the words carved upon it are the words of man and not every man speaks the truth either with his tongue or his hand.’

‘But you believe your sister lies in the ground!’

‘Yes.’ The answer sighed in the quiet room. ‘Yes, I believe Bethany is buried in that churchyard but that is all I believe except Uriah Buckley is a liar. His eyes tell he is hiding a secret, that his heart knows a truth too terrible to tell.’

Rani had helped her to bed, sitting beside her until she thought her asleep, then had slipped silently from the room. But sleep was far away. Her glance going to the window, the curtains open to the beauty of the silvered night, Amber’s mind crossed the boundary of time. India! How she had romanced the thought of that country during the long weeks of the voyage, lived out a fairy tale of imaginings. It would be bright and

colourful; warm days in the shade of an awning chatting to others like herself, companions to officers' wives and daughters; exotic nights when the perfume of a thousand flowers turned the air to heady scent and young men paid her compliments. But dreams were all they had ever been. Helen Buckley, Joanna's mother, had taken the fever, dying before ever they had reached Meerut. The girl had been distraught, lying in her bed days and nights on end until her father had said she must return to England. That and only that had snapped her from her misery. She would not return to England; she would stay where she belonged, with her father, and Amber must stay with her.

She had tried to reason with Joanna. Amber watched the memories take on shape, emerging from the shadows like living phantoms. *There was no earthly reason for her to return home.* The girl had been adamant. *Were her family not in the care of her grandfather . . . would he not care for them, keep them safe?* Her father too had thought the same: his daughter needed a companion. There could be no further argument and without money of her own to buy passage back to England she had been trapped. She had written home explaining to Bethany and Denny what had happened, promising them she would return as soon as possible. Days had become weeks and weeks turned to months and still her promise had not been kept. With the attention of a handsome lieutenant Joanna had gradually returned to the smiling girl she had been in England. Though she visited her mother's grave regularly the sorrow of her loss seemed to fade a little

more each day until she had finally felt ready to visit the local bazaar.

Colonel Buckley had smiled when, dragging Amber behind her, Joanna had gone to where he sat taking tiffin, the afternoon refreshment, on the low white-painted veranda.

'Sit down, Joanna,' he had said, flicking a raffia fan, *'your energy is too much for an old man!'*

Landing a kiss on his cheek before curling herself at his feet she had laughed. *'Age would never dare attack my father.'*

'But youth would attempt to charm him.'

Memory showed Amber the grey-streaked head turning towards herself, the blue eyes smiling.

'Tell me, Amber, what is it this time?'

'The storyteller, Father,' Joanna had answered first, excitement dancing in her voice, *'the storyteller has come to the bazaar, please may we go to listen to him?'*

'And who is it says the storyteller has come to the bazaar?'

'Everybody says so, the servants . . . Narinder . . . just everybody.'

Joanna had half risen, placing her hand on his knee like an adoring dog. *'Can we go, Father . . . please?'*

His eyes had shown any thought of rejection was lost yet he had tried to retain some modicum of restraint. *'Is this so, Narinder?'* he had asked the Indian nurse stood apart from them, her sari curling with the touch of a slight breeze. *'Has the storyteller come to the bazaar?'*

The figure Amber knew was simply a projection of

her mind nodded its head, the woman's voice sounding softly in her ears. *'It is so, sahib.'*

'And does he stay?'

Amber watched the chestnut eyes rest momentarily on those of the colonel then dropped before she replied. *'Only for this day, sahib.'*

'And tomorrow?'

'He goes, sahib, to who knows where.'

'I see.' Jervis Buckley touched his fingers to the head of the girl crouched at his feet. Hair and eyes the colour of her mother's, the face upturned to him so like Helen's. *'If this wonderful storyteller is staying in Meerut for only one day then I suppose I must let the both of you go and hear his tales. But remember,'* he had looked from Joanna's face to Amber's, *'the bazaar gets very crowded and with the storyteller being there this evening, it will be more so; everyone will come from the villages to listen, you don't need me to tell you how fond these people are of their stories, so be sure you stay close to Narinder and when she says it is time to return here you obey her!'*

If only there had been the chance to obey! Amber closed her eyes, pressing the lids with her fingers to wipe out the pictures. If only she had listened to Narinder; Joanna's ayah, the Indian nurse assigned to look after Jervis Buckley's daughter, had attempted to dissuade the girl. The heat . . . the flies . . . the beggars . . . she had tried each argument in turn, her use of English giving way more and more to her native tongue. The bazaar was not the place for an English memsahib, it was unseemly, there would be the charmer of snakes

with his basket of cobras, did they want to see such creatures . . . then there would be the donkeys, the smell of dung, did they want the stink of that in their nostrils?

She could have done more to help Narinder, she could have added her voice to those pleas, said she found the idea of a trip to the bazaar frightening, that she had no wish to go there. Joanna would have listened. She would have been disappointed but she would have listened.

But she had said none of those things! Amber's breath trembled on a sob. She had said nothing and Joanna Buckley had lost her life!