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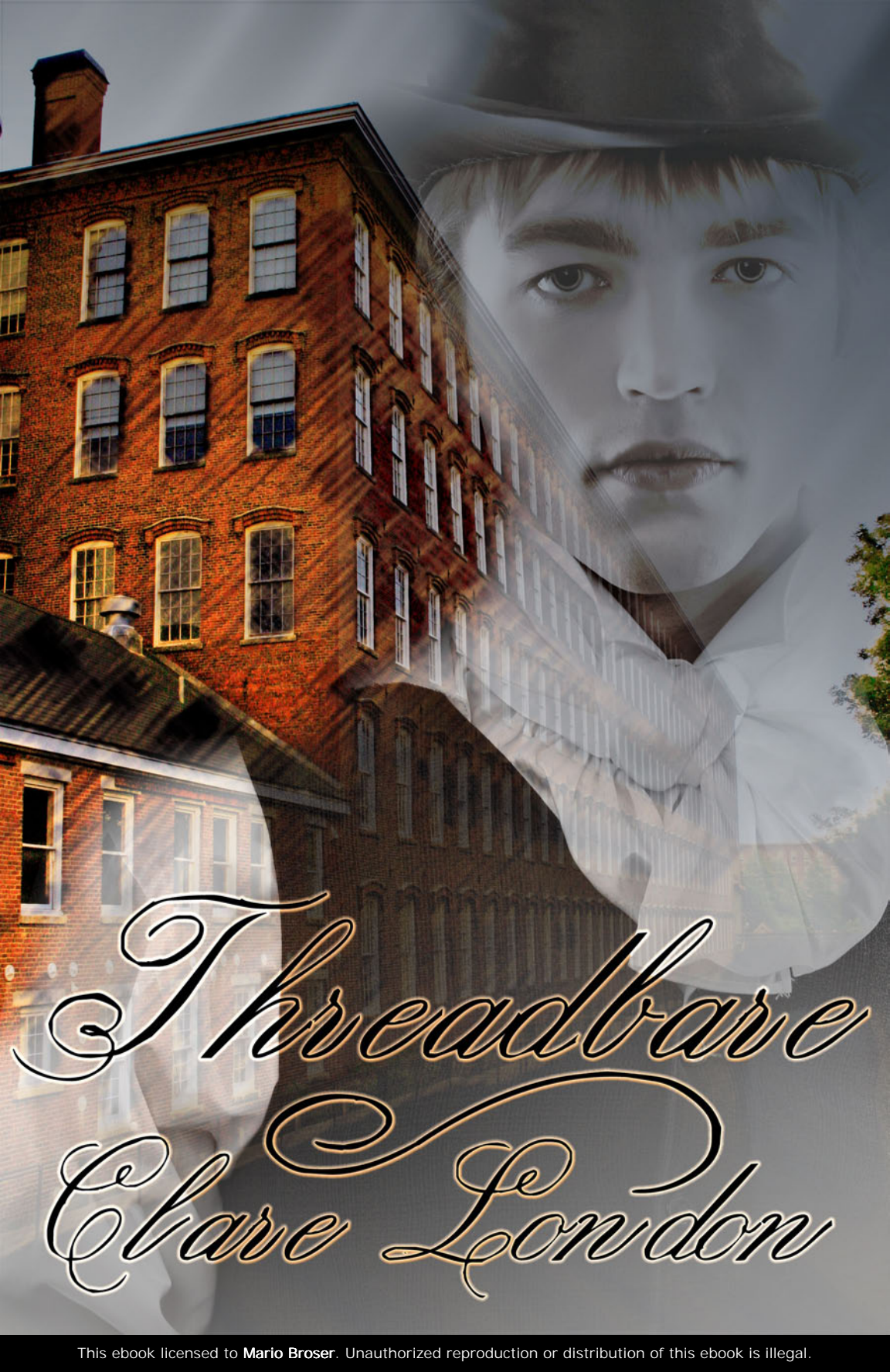
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Threadbare Clare London

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By Clare London

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Threadbare

By Clare London

The scream was blood-curdling, as if an animal were having its throat cut. It reverberated through the hot, stifling air of the weaving room, slicing through the steady hum and thud of the looms with the sharp cruelty of a blade.

Inside my sheltered office I heard the noise as clearly as if I were on the factory floor. I was on my feet at once, though my bookkeeper held out his hand to pacify me. "Sir, please don't trouble yourself, the manager will see to it..."

In two strides I passed both him and his tedious reports, the sheets of paper fluttering from his fumbling hands as he tried to get out of my way. I stepped out on to the platform outside my office, from where I had a view of the looms below. I could hear the wails and shouts even over the relentless clattering of the bobbins. Clusters of workers were huddled against the wall, their bodies silhouetted against the light from the tall windows. I saw the floor manager crouched down at the back of the room. The heavy spindles of coloured thread lay on the floor around him as if toppled aside in his haste to reach that particular loom.

Slowly the frantic noise lessened. Wails sank to mere moans; the pace of the machines slowed. The manager moved and then I could see the crumpled figure on the floor at his feet. A slender shape—a young woman, I thought. I employed many of them at the mill, as their hands were more skilled on the delicate finishing work, and they so often had young families or old parents to support. She was so still and her face so white I realised at once she was badly hurt. Then I noted the awkward position of her left arm and with sickening horror saw that her arm was almost torn from her shoulder, the elbow twisted awkwardly against her hip. A pool of blood seeped steadily from under her body.

The smell hit me for the first time; cloying, sickly-sweet blood. The wooden floor was stained like an abattoir.

The manager was shouting and gesticulating, ordering the

other workers back to their positions. He glanced up at me and shook his head. She would die in a very short while, as any person would after such an accident. We'd seen it happen before. Carelessness or tiredness would nudge a worker one step too close to the machinery, and there'd be no mercy for them. I consider myself a humane employer and I'll call my doctor to treat illness, but for this level of shock and dismemberment there was no aid to be sought.

There was another small group of workers gathered around the body. Some were crying, and they clutched at each other for support. They all had the same long dark hair as the dying woman, the same thin body under the shapeless shifts they wore, the same pale skin. I wondered briefly if they were family members, or from the same ethnic group. Then one of them, a tall young man, stepped away from the group and ran a hand roughly over his eyes. The sleeve of his shift fell back from his wrist, showing a strong arm but long, delicate fingers.

I was about to go back into my office but in that instant he looked up at me, and it gave me pause. Even from this distance, I could see his eyes were damp with tears. His pupils were dilated, an impenetrable blackness surrounded by vibrant blue irises. They glinted at me, vivid in his thin, smooth-shaven face. His mouth was surprisingly well-shaped for a man, and as I watched, the full lips formed words I couldn't physically hear over the hubbub, but appeared just as clearly to me as if I had.

Help us all, he seemed to be saying. Help me.

* * * *

It was over an hour past the time I would usually leave for the evening. I had pulled my greatcoat around my shoulders and I held my cane ready in my hand, but I was still waiting alone in my office.

I'd never thought of myself as a particularly introspective man, yet I'd been restless all day. The factory floor had settled down again after the morning's disaster, but the accident had lingered in my mind. I'd given my report to the local police, and the undertaker had arrived and taken the body away to bury it at

my charitable expense. In most people's minds the business had now moved on. *Accidents happen. No point dwelling on it. You've done your duty as an employer, why waste any more time?* Neither the manager nor the supervisors said anything aloud—they were too cautious of angering me—but I could guess their thoughts. *After all, that's what always happened in the old man's time.*

I'd experienced some difficulty in getting support when I took over the factory from my father, for many of the other local businessmen thought I was too young to maintain it. Many also thought I was too weak, I'm sure, for I'd spent much of my earlier years in more artistic pursuits. I'd been a quiet, careful boy, who liked nothing more than my books and some amateur painting. But I had accepted my inheritance with stoicism and a few ideas of my own. Even before the passing of the recent Acts to restrict the use of children as employees, I'd refused to employ the scrawny, often orphaned waifs my competitors used—although their cost was so much less—but instead, I'd sought to provide employment for young men and women, to support the local families. I established a system of shifts so no employee worked inordinately long hours. I maintained a doctor for their health and provided some basic refreshments for their meals.

No one gets rich with those ideas. I knew what was being said behind my back. Small factory, small ambition, small mind. Yet it was the only way I found I could tolerate the business. And now, five years later, I was still young, of course—at least compared to the pompous dignitaries of the town—but I'd gradually proved I could foster commercial success as well as appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the product. I would never compete with the larger factories, the more mechanised trade. But we produced good quality cloth, some of it with a lustre to the fabric that was close to silk, and much admired. The business made money, I had a good product I could be proud of, and a steady stream of reliable workers. I'd made myself a comfortable, if modest life.

It had never been an easy time for me, though. My sacrifices had made me what I was today.

The tentative knock on my door was expected, and I beckoned the young man into the room. If I hadn't sent my secretary home some hours earlier, I'm sure she would have thought it highly irregular I should call an employee personally into my office, especially when many of the workers had gone home and the looms were soon to be stilled for the night.

Up close he looked older than I'd estimated, and I wondered if he were one of the seniors of his shift's group, sent to me as spokesman. But in front of me, he seemed to lack any real confidence. He stood awkwardly in his ill-fitting shift and trousers and his clumsy boots, looking for all the world as if he were awaiting punishment for some sin of his own. I was disconcerted to feel his nervousness prompting a similar echo inside myself, although I'd successfully hidden my personal insecurities behind my professional face for a long time now. His hands were clasped in front of him as if in supplication and I noted again the fine bones and fingers. There was a smear of dried blood on them, which I suspected was from touching the injured woman, earlier.

"I'm sorry if you lost a friend in the accident," I said, not unkindly. "But I hear that your group has refused another employee to help with your workload, and I can't allow any drop in productivity. If you feel you cannot work here any more..."

“But I can!” His words burst out. It was the first time I’d ever heard him speak. Whatever my compassion towards employees, it wasn’t accepted behaviour to socialise with them. “Forgive me, sir, that wasn’t my intention. We can manage the extra work. We all help each other. And it’s just...we don’t want to work with a stranger.” He had a slight accent which I didn’t recognise, but his speech was unexpectedly clear and well formed. There were unshed tears in his eyes, making him seem younger and more fragile.

I frowned. The manager had by now told me some details about these unusual young people. They'd been supplied to the mill by an employment agent from out of town, and they all stayed together in some fairly rough lodgings hired out by a local business. They were obviously not natives of this area, although

to hold on to whatever was hidden under his clothes. A piece of folded material fell to the floor, tangling around his feet. He bent to snatch it up, but caught my eye and pulled back his hand. He was very flushed now.

I picked up the item myself, not knowing what to expect. Sometimes a worker would steal cloth or cotton thread, either for themselves or to sell on at the market, but this wasn't any of my plain cloth. It was a piece of embroidered work, with colour woven in a spiral pattern. The edges of the cloth were rough but the central panel had been very carefully—and very beautifully—quilted, with thread that was smoother than anything I used in my weaving here at the mill. There was no identifiable subject, but the blocks of stitching were twisted and blended in such a way they mimicked real movement. I was reminded of the way grasses bend as a wind blows through them, or the rippling of the sea on a cool spring day. The colours were muted but each one individually fascinating. The overall effect was pale and soft and almost luminous.

“Sir...please, I’m sorry.” His eyes were even wider, full of distress. His lower lip trembled. “We only work on it after our shifts have finished. If we need more fabric, we use only the rags from the mill’s rubbish.”

"It's astonishing," I said slowly. I couldn't tear my eyes away from its exquisiteness. "Did you design this yourself?"

He moaned softly. "We all contribute. I'm the keeper, that's all."

I brushed gently at the stitching, admiring the soft texture. The tapestry itself was amazingly tactile. As I moved my fingers across it, it seemed to cling to them with a strange, silken stickiness. From an early age, I had loved art and the creation of it, but I had an especial fascination for textiles, finding delight both in their feel and their appearance. I appreciated beauty in both form and substance, and to me, there was an absorbing splendour in fine, well-designed embroidery. These feelings had gone a long way towards easing the burdensome inheritance of this business.

“The colours ...” I burned with a professional curiosity.

“How have you made such palettes? Your design skills are better than anything I’ve seen for years. This shade here, of a late blooming rose...” He gasped, and I quickly looked back at him.

"Flora made the blush," he whispered. "There'll be no more of that now."

I assumed he meant the dead woman. I watched the grief flicker in his eyes and something unfamiliar tugged at my heart. "I have mixed many new dyes," I said, gently. "Some I've not yet used, even here at the mill. Maybe I could make you a similar shade."

His expression was a strange mixture of surprise and, for a second, hope. But then he shook his head, just the once. His eyes rolled and his knees buckled.

I caught him in my arms as he swooned.

* * * *

He was so slim I enclosed him within my coat and could still have buttoned it back together. I held him tightly against my body, and he nestled back, his soft moans as needy as a wounded bird. I had moved instinctively, but it was an astonishing feeling to hold another human so closely to me—another *man*. I couldn't recall ever having touched an acquaintance beyond a hearty handshake. Mori was recovering his senses slowly; I could feel his limbs straightening again. But for a few more moments his shivering arms clung to me, and his face pressed against my shirt. He sighed, and his breath dampened the cool material with warmth. To my surprise, I felt a stirring in my groin—the flesh of my cock swelled inside the expensive fabric of my trousers. I would have blushed at such nonsense but then he glanced up at me and I felt a shudder through my body I'd not known for many years.

My desires were as young as my age, once upon a time, before I'd known the restrictions of my family responsibilities. I doubt many would have thought it to look at me, but I knew the same lusts as any man. Nowadays, of course, people saw me as a man only a few years beyond legal maturity but old before his

That first night, when I took Mori to my house, I felt as if I'd been possessed by a spirit far braver and bolder than my usual self. Did he realise my inexperience with guests? If so, he never complained. I fed him a supper of whatever I could find in the kitchen, preparing it myself, for I found it difficult to recruit full-time staff for the isolated place that my home had become. He ate voraciously, though not rudely. He drank far more than he ate, devouring my water and cordials with a surprising hunger. His eyes flickered constantly to me as he supped, listening to everything I said, nodding and encouraging me.

What nonsense I spoke, though. I had little conversation for a social occasion, let alone for someone I wished to impress. I talked about the house and the mill until I bored even myself, then in amongst old words and previously hidden emotions I found the desire to talk about my deceased family. It was astonishing, not least of all to me, for I'd not shared my personal thoughts for many years. At one point, I sighed aloud for my adolescent dreams, stunted before they could mature into something worthy of a man's life. I'd wanted to be an artist—to paint, rather than to weave—but Father had made it abundantly clear the option was unavailable. It made me flush with embarrassment to admit all this aloud, but Mori's eyes softened as they gazed at me.

"You love beauty. Of course you do," he said, softly. "I understand now why your cloth has to be of such high quality."

"You mean, why I work my employees so hard?" I replied wryly.

He shook his head and smiled, and it didn't seem sly or resentful. "It's why we chose this place to work," he said, simply.

We sat at my dining table together, in a strange, self-contained world of our own. My voice echoed in the bare room as if it came from another's mouth, someone alien to the man I'd always thought I was. Mori listened carefully to me for a long while, speaking only occasionally, but eventually his eyes grew heavy with sleep, and so I took him to my little-used guest room.

I had no clothes that would fit a slim figure like his, so all I could do was leave him warm water and soap for washing and a shirt of mine that might do as a nightshirt.

He lifted it and held the expensive material close to his face, running a finger along its sleeve. I think he sighed. When I said goodnight to him and was closing the door behind me, I caught a glimpse of him rubbing the silken cloth lovingly against his cheek.

* * * *

At midnight, I woke suddenly to find my guest out of bed and in my own room. There was only a single candle alight on my bedside table, sweeping large and mysterious shadows around anything that moved. Mori stood at the foot of my bed, barefoot and with the hem of my ridiculously large shirt hanging down below his hips, clutching his tapestry against his chest. I had brought it to my room to examine it further before I retired for the night. Did he think I'd intended to steal it from him?

I sat up in bed slowly, my heart thudding hard with the shock, but I was wary of scaring him in return. "It's safe with me," I said. "Go back to your bed, Mori."

But he didn't move away. He no longer seemed like a nervous, skittish animal. He stood calmly and gazed back at me. "I want to come to *your* bed," he said, softly. "*I* want to be safe with you, too."

I didn't know what to do. Is that so shameful, considering my more advanced age and my presumed wisdom? But I couldn't answer him; couldn't move either to encourage or dismiss him. Instead, I watched him lift the coverlet and slip into bed beside me, and I thought I'd cease breathing from the excitement and the fear. He pressed against me as if to meld our bodies together, and I could feel his heart beating under his narrow ribcage. His hand ran down my back and I arched against it. He kissed gently at my jaw, his lips very moist and sticky with his warm, eager breath.

"Mori..." I gasped. "You don't have to."

“I do,” he sighed back. “It will make you happy. And it will make *me* happy.”

He'd been obedient and grateful since I brought him home, and for a horrifying moment I thought he might be offering this purely as an obligatory part of his employment. If I were honest, I knew there were plenty of other factory owners who used their employees in such ways, both male and female, sometimes at a shockingly young age. But Mori was old enough to understand this, and I'd also given him the chance to refuse without giving me offence. Hadn't I? He seemed genuine in his desire to be beside me.

He knelt up, his hands stroking underneath my nightshirt, lifting it up over my head. I undressed him in the same way, though my hands were trembling. His eyes glinted in the shadowy dark, gazing at me. His body was smooth and slim, and his skin almost translucent. He was astonishingly beautiful. He kissed my shoulder and he whispered against me, and when he nudged my knees apart with gentle hands and dipped his head down, I felt the wet trail of his saliva along my inner thigh.

I held my breath, hardly daring to hope, and yet so very confused as to what I was hoping for.

His lips slid down over my half-erect cock, taking me into his mouth, hesitantly at first and then more boldly. He licked me, savouring me, and all I could do was listen helplessly to the soft, sucking sounds that came from between my paralysed legs. I felt myself swell in his mouth; felt heat in my groin that consumed me. When I came, I cried out shamelessly, for I'd never known anything like it. I think I gripped his hair too tightly, but he didn't protest. For several long, delicious moments he continued to lick at me, drinking me, caressing me. It was as if he cleaned me of the astonishing burst of hot, thick seed that had been brewing inside me for far too long.

And when he lifted his young head up to mine again, I saw his lips glistening and the pleasure in his half-lidded, smiling eyes.

* * * *

Sometimes they rustled as they passed through on their way either to break or on their way home. No other worker's tunic and shift made that noise, yet all uniforms were cut from the same cloth. Or maybe the soft thrum of noise came from the people themselves. It was too strange for me to consider further. All of them exhibited the graceful movements that were so marked in Mori. To a greater or lesser extent, they seemed always to be moving, their hands teasing at something invisible in the air of the hall, as if they still worked the thread.

They took their breaks separately from the other employees, and sometimes I would catch a glimpse of Mori's tapestry, as one or other would add to it. Their sewing was swift, their fingers deft, and it was astonishing to watch now my attention had been drawn to it. Each one seemed to have their own favourite shade of thread, their small hands darting back and forth over the canvas. I use that analogy deliberately, for it was, indeed, like a work of art. The imagination and flair involved in its design was magnificent, and they nurtured its creation like a group of bustling insects.

Why was I so fascinated by it? I didn't understand what it meant to Mori, why he treasured it, why he seemed content for it to be his only personal possession. I tried to give him money of his own but he declined it. I fed him and clothed him, but he only took the minimum that he needed. I wanted to provide for him but he didn't seem to want more.

He seemed happy enough with his life—with me—and that was all I strove for.

* * * *

He would come to me at the end of a working day, smile and put his hand on my arm. The small, familiar gestures filled me with a mix of excitement and comfort. We'd travel back together to my house, have a light supper—though Mori always ate more than I did—and at the end of our quiet evening, he'd come upstairs to sleep with me most willingly.

But in the middle of the night I often woke to find him gone

"What will you do with it when it's finished?" I persisted. "Who is it for?"

"There are many more years for you to be remembered," I snapped, frustrated by his resignation. "Your talent has created such a superb thing already—it will create many such treasures in the future. This is just one, a childish fancy that you should have grown out of."

“You’ll never need to!” I urged, shocked he’d think I would discard him like that. I kissed him in return, and led him back to my bed.

I'd been astounded when he first offered himself to me sexually, sliding on to hands and knees among my creased white sheets, spreading his thighs and whimpering softly for my attention. In my mind, beauty and desire and love didn't have to be restricted to a woman, but I had never been drawn like this to a male, either. I suppose I knew men could be intimate with each other, and the thought might have excited me in my secret dreams, though I had never seen or experienced anything of it in real life. But Mori was both someone and something that my real life had never known before. The excitement he roused in me was astonishing. I wouldn't have been able to refuse him, even if my conscience had been purer, but I'd been so clumsy in taking

Their numbers diminished shockingly swiftly.

The manager came to my office, late in the day when many staff had left. “Another man’s died,” he said, bluntly. He’d seen death many times before and had little awe of it. “Been wheezing most of the week, now he’s dropped dead at his bench at break time.”

“From Mor—from the same group?”

He looked at me with confusion, for I believe all the workers seemed the same to him. “The ones from out of town? Yes, sir, I think so. That lot have been a mixed blessing. Good product but weak stamina. I’ll not use that agent again.”

During the last few days I’d often stood on the platform by my office, watching the remaining employees from Mori’s group. The mill itself was far too conducive to disease, with many people working in close proximity, and a lack of fresh, circulating air. However, most of my workers had developed the necessary immunity and it was only the ones from out of town who had fallen victim. I’d seen the recent listlessness of their bodies; their increasingly frequent carelessness. It was distressing.

I was frightened for Mori in case he contracted it too. I decided to insist he keep away from the mill from now on. He’d protest, but hopefully only for a while. He would be safe in my house, several miles away, where I could protect him. He was the picture of health now, a strong young man, his body thickening and his muscles strengthening. But his mood had been depressed since the epidemic began. There were so few of his friends left now, and this latest death would be another blow.

I went out on to the platform. Mori was still on the factory floor and saw me watching. He smiled up at me, but his smile was weak and didn’t reach his eyes. I sent the manager out and my secretary home for the day and loosened my necktie. I seemed to have difficulty in breathing calmly. Then I called Mori up to the office—unheard of during the working day, unless there was a disciplinary issue. But all I knew was that I needed to touch him, to soothe my terror of losing him.

He came in quietly, staring at me with unhappy eyes, absorbing the fear that shone blatantly from mine. I walked past

we have work to do together.”

“The tapestry? You can finish that yourself.”

He didn’t answer me directly but stared at me with sorrowful eyes. “Without my friends, how can I carry on?”

“You have me, Mori. I can be everything to you.”

He blinked hard, and then he smiled. “I never thought someone like you would want me, Edward. I’ve done nothing to deserve it.”

I pulled him to me to kiss him. I didn’t understand him at times like this. “But you *have*. You’ve wanted me in return. Come back to bed and please me.”

“They chose me as the best one,” he sighed into my mouth, softening against me and clasping his cool hands behind my neck. “That’s what I must be. I must still do my duty.”

His thick little tongue flickered in my mouth, seeking my hunger alongside his own. I didn’t know if he meant his words for me, or for his damned tapestry. But his saliva was sticky, and it tasted so very, very sweet.

When I took him back into my bed and he wrapped his limbs around me so ardently, I knew I could call it making love.

* * * *

The last of Mori’s group to be working at the mill was a young woman, barely more than a girl. When she also, inevitably, fell ill, I kept the news from him. He lived comfortably with me, with his tapestry to occupy him and some light duties around the house, though I’m sure my daily staff disapproved of my guardianship of such an unusual young man. Maybe my infatuation with him blinded my sense. All I can say is I didn’t care in the slightest.

I wanted him every moment of the day, whether I was with him or not. I sat at my desk at the mill, ignoring my work, and I imagined his blue eyes watching me as I spoke to him; his eager gratitude for the meals we shared; his smile when I tried to entertain him with ill-practised jokes. I heard, echoing deeply inside my head, the gasp of anticipation from his plump, moist

lips when I reached for him, and my skin shivered in memory of the quick twisting of his body as it landed happily on my lap. I remembered the cool smoothness of his bare skin under my sheets at night and the contrast of his hot, shallow breath in my ear, whispering endearments to me, sighing, *begging*...

"Take me, Edward. Keep me safe."

However, I couldn't help but notice a gradual change in his moods. He became more self-absorbed and the fascination with his tapestry work increased. His night time sojourns became far more frequent. To me, he was still a devoted lover, but his companionship was often unsettling. He would slip in and out of my bed several times a night. Each time he returned, he would seek affection in his most enthusiastic way.

I tolerated everything because I couldn't get enough of him. I was often fierce and clumsy, but he was always welcoming. I was afraid of hurting him, but he clung to me every time, accepting everything I could give him. It was too embarrassing to admit I was tired out, suddenly enjoying a full sexual relationship after many celibate years, but he was like a drug to me. I craved the soft touch of his tongue on my skin, and especially when he'd take me into his mouth, sucking me to a sobbing climax and then licking up every last drop. His mouth was astonishingly adept at such pleasure, though what real experience did I have to compare it with?

I spent more and more time away from the mill, bringing most of my work home with me. Mori liked to sit with me and listen to tales of the business—the customers I had negotiations with; the latest materials and how they were woven; the condition of the looms; the popularity of this season’s designs. I even took up some painting again, rather embarrassed to show my immature talent in front of someone, but he liked to watch me. I rediscovered the joy I had in seeing a scene come to life in just a few brush strokes, though I knew my style was unusual for the time, concentrating on the mood and atmosphere of a subject rather than a strict representation. I knew no one would ever buy my work, but it didn’t matter. Mori watched as I mixed paints on the palette and suggested his own ideas for colour and shade.

He also liked to look at my books, and we'd often sit for an evening in front of the fire, eating supper and sharing our opinions of my modest library. Most of my books were little more than catalogues, but Mori seemed to like looking at the design sketches.

"It can be." I smiled back at him. "You have great talent, and years ahead of you. I'll sponsor you. Maybe you'll be famous." I meant it as a gentle joke, but his eyes lit up at the thought.

"Yes," I replied, at a loss to understand him, but meaning every word regardless. "Yes, I believe you are the one."

“She’s dead,” Mori sighed, one evening. He sat listlessly in the bay of the lounge window, staring out at nothing but the spring mist settling on my garden lawn for the night. “Lenis is dead.”

His body was tense, and there was an edge of panic in his words. "That's it now. No one left but me. I never thought it would be like this—it's not what's meant to happen. The tapestry must be finished, and I'm the only one who can complete it. But what will I do then?"

He shrugged fondly, as if I were a child to be patronised. "You're too good to me, Edward. My greatest comfort is that you

love beautiful things, that you appreciate my work. That's something I never thought I'd have, and it's made the work so much easier. But I'm still the only one left."

He'd been working every spare moment on the tapestry recently, and considering he was now the only worker, he had created the most magnificent range of embroidery—many different stitches and patterns, all in the same pale, silvery thread that was the one he personally seemed to favour. He asked me to look at it many times, sometimes shyly, sometimes proudly. I praised it with a mixture of admiration and confusion.

“Don’t worry,” I repeated. “Don’t be lonely without them. I’d do anything to make you happy.” The words sounded strange in my mouth, for I’d never said such a thing to anyone before. There had never been anyone in my life that provoked such emotion in me.

He frowned a little, but then smiled and rose gracefully from his seat. "But I'm not lonely, Edward. I thought you'd know that by now. Don't you know how much all this means to me, being here with you?" He ran his fingers down the front of his shirt, loosening the buttons one by one, his eyes on mine. I watched as his tongue flickered out to moisten his lips, then he started to walk over to me, his hand still stroking at his bared chest. His whole bearing was a delicious mixture of wanton confidence and tentativeness. He knew what would distract me by now—he knew what would make us both happy.

My papers scattered to the floor, unheeded.

* * * *

I woke suddenly. I was in my bed, and I vaguely remembered stumbling there earlier in the evening, with laughter in my throat and an armful of discarded clothes. The room was now dark, the candlelight extinguished. The mattress dipped as Mori climbed back in beside me, then I felt his breath on my torso and his hands searching eagerly between my legs, stroking at my limp cock. He was whispering things that I couldn't hear properly. He wriggled his legs to climb astride me as I lay there.

My arousal stirred sleepily, responding to him. I peered at him, still groggy with tiredness. "What are you doing? Where have you been?"

His eyes were dark in the shadows of my room, but I could see his determined expression. "Edward." His tone was unusually sharp. "I've been working."

"Not now," I sighed, only half listening. "Middle of the night...leave it be, for once."

He shook his head, his hair brushing against my ribs. "Who else will do it? I'm their pride, their remembrance. It's all been in preparation for this. The time has come. It can't be denied." His voice grew more urgent and higher too, more like a young child's. "But I'm confused about it, too. I don't have them around me to help. To help me through it; to carry on whatever is needed."

"I'm here instead," I mumbled into my pillow, but he didn't answer that.

"I didn't know I'd meet you, Edward," he whispered. He still sounded distressed. "I didn't know I'd want you like this. To be with you. To *stay* with you."

His hands were pumping me lazily to a thick, sensual arousal and I moaned. "Always be here. You can be, too..."

"Take me," he hissed. "Please take me." His hips rocked against me, and I groaned with the intensity of his passion. When he lifted himself up and started to lower himself down on to me, I surrendered to it, because I knew it would be marvellous.

I didn't know why I felt the first stirrings of panic, myself.

* * * *

It was after midnight when I woke again, and my limbs were weary from our earlier lovemaking. Mori never showed any tiredness; he never failed in his enthusiasm. I stretched, my fingers brushing against the gentle indentation in the pillow beside me, evidence that Mori had gone again. I yawned. It was nothing unusual. But the sudden thudding of my heart was.

Wrapped in my gown, I went to search for him, and I found him—also nothing unusual—in his room. He didn't see me

arrive at the doorway and I paused for a moment instead of calling to him. He was standing by his chair, clutching the tapestry, with his back to me and his tousled dark hair nestling in the nape of his neck. There was a thin sheet draped around his hips, but his back and arms were bare. He turned his head to the side and I saw him lift the tapestry slowly to his face. For one shocking moment, it looked as if he kissed it. But then I saw he just touched it to his lips, drawing it away again. In the dim candlelight I saw something gleaming on his lips.

He swept the tapestry out to the side with an elegant gesture, holding it aloft. Its surface shone with a delicate gloss, its reflection a brilliant blend of chiaroscuro, the textured shadows and tints mimicking the pale coolness of his skin and striking dark of his hair. There was a sudden glint of silver and I saw a thread running from its centre back up to his mouth. With his free hand, he captured this thread and twisted it slowly, sensuously between his fingers. My heart beat very quickly, and I felt an inexplicable, uncontrollable fear. It connected him; it bound him; it *was* him!

And then he turned around to see me watching.

* * * *

For a moment, all he did was stare at me. He didn't look at all startled. In fact, he looked as still and self-contained as a marble sculpture, and just as beautiful. A dark expression flickered in his eyes that I had never seen before. He let the tapestry drop gently from his fingers on to the floor. The thread from it now stretched between the ground and his fingers, clinging to him, snagging against his torso. I was amazed that it looked so fragile, yet didn't break.

Then he started to move towards me. The bottom hem of the sheet caught under his foot and it fell away from his body, crumpling at his feet as he walked forward, careless of it. He was totally naked, and fully aroused. I wanted to speak but my throat was dry, my mouth unable to move. He lifted a forefinger to his bottom lip—was he asking for my silence?—and when he drew it

wanted to be sick—I wanted to scream in anger and distress.

“I will make this beautiful thread for *you*, Edward,” he murmured. He was weaving strands around in his hair now, for all the world like a young girl plaiting in a chain of daisies. His voice was muffled and wistful. “You’ve been my love. You’ve been my support. I have no one else to understand, and it’s the least I can do for you.” He swayed away from me, half turning, and I thought he might fall. “This will be the best of all. You’ll finish the tapestry for me with it, but then it will be yours alone. Your cloth will be the finest. You’ll be famous, like you promised me once.”

“No!” I felt energy coursing back through me. This was some kind of nightmare, wasn’t it? How could he think a cloth was more important to me than the man himself? “I’ll break you out of there.”

It was his turn to cry out. “No! You mustn’t!” He stepped back, twisting away from me. “You’ll ruin the thread. It must be unbroken, else it’s no better than the useless lengths the others used. Their work was good but not brilliant—their thread fine but no comparison to *this*. For them, it was work. For me, it’s my *life*!” His eyes shone fiercely behind the mask that was still, inexorably, spinning its pattern across his face. “You’ll spoil everything I’ve worked for.”

“It’s you I want,” I cried. “I care nothing for a thread.” I swallowed my revulsion and reached again to touch the cocoon. I decided I could work my fingers in between the layers. I was stronger than many took me for. I would rip it apart and drag him out to safety.

“You’ll kill me,” said Mori, sharply. I paused, shocked. “This is all I have left, Edward. If I leave here, I have nothing to look forward to but mating and death. And now there’s no one for me to mate with, so there’s only...” He stopped, wheezing slightly as if he found it hard to breathe. “All I have left is to create beauty. Let me do that in my own way, in my own time. That’s all I have left to give you.”

I shook my head. It was far too much to assimilate. I stepped forward, still determined, ignoring his urgent cries. He was totally enveloped now—his figure gone, his expressions

gone, his voice nothing but a hum. The cocoon vibrated gently, glinting in the dim light of the room. I grasped it as best I could, taking two handholds on its sides. It depressed gently under my touch and I pushed my fingers on through the casing. It shuddered. I levered my hands through, wrenching an opening in it and pulling the sides apart.

“*Edward...*” It didn’t sound like Mori’s voice at all anymore. There was horror in its tone, need—and fear. I grasped at his body and started to haul it out of its shell. The thread still clung to him. I tore at the layers, peeling them from his limbs, dragging his upper body out. I pushed at the shrivelling edges of the cocoon, trying to force them away from his legs.

He emerged in a sudden burst, his body falling against mine, his skin sticky and branded in spirals from the path of the thread. His limbs were unmoving and his eyes and mouth still half covered, like a child not yet born. We fell back on to the floor together, the cocoon thudding to the ground and rolling away. I held him and I could hear myself panting, weeping, too, though I hadn't realised it before. I called his name but there was no longer any sound from him. No movement, either.

The cocoon lay hollow and sinister on the floor beside us. Around my feet were many strands of broken thread, pale and shining, like Mori's skin had once been. It had the same lustre as the thread he'd been working into his tapestry.

I lay there, clasping him to me for many, many hours. I kissed the place where his mouth was closed, where his soft, full, living lips would have been. I waited for him to return to me; I waited for the reassurance that I'd snatched him back to his life with me.

It never came.

* * * *

Years later...

There's been more trouble at the house and another member of staff has left in tears. She wanted to sweep up the

befitting a successful young businessman, albeit one whose factory is now run by salaried, corporate managers, leaving the businessman little more than a figurehead. She assures me I will be able to take a full part in it again one day, and I nod as if that would please me. I don't really have a desire either way. But we will have a child next summer, the only anticipation that delights me on a daily basis. It will be good to have someone to teach the business to—to share the tales like I used to with Mori.

I can hear her downstairs, walking towards the dining room, assuming I am still asleep here in my room. I'm grateful I will not be asked to join her tonight for supper, though her company is pleasant enough. Instead, I move carefully to the wall and lift down the tapestry. When I sit back in my chair, I lay it on my lap, all the better to feel its texture, to admire the fine, silvery thread that has been woven through it.

That thread was the last to be added—the very best thread of all, just like he promised me. I’ve never been able to replicate it at the mill, and to be honest, I have no appetite to try. There was enough to finish the tapestry and to make me a pair of fine handkerchiefs. When I’m on my own, I sleep with one under my pillow and my sleep is never better. I think Mori would be pleased I salvaged even that from the ruins of that night.

I brush my fingertips over the canvas now, feeling its silken tackiness, letting it adhere seductively to me. I imagine I can see a thread rising out of it, following the path of my hand and clinging to me, spinning across my lap. I imagine I have created it—that I can carry on Mori's work. I'd like to twist it gently around my wrist and imagine the feel of the cocoon enveloping me, too. I was too scared to allow that before, and so I lost him. But one day I'll join him again. One day we'll appreciate the beauty together.

Maybe it's not my imagination at all, but a thread that I can truly see and feel. I can only pray for that to be the case, one day soon.

Then that silken thread will bind us together for ever.

THE END

ABOUT CLARE LONDON

Clare took the pen name London from the city where she lives, loves, and writes. A lone, brave female in a frenetic, testosterone-fuelled family home, she juggles her writing with the weekly wash, waiting for the far distant day when she can afford to give up her day job as an accountant. She's written in many genres and across many settings, with novels and short stories published both online and in print. She says she likes variety in her writing while friends say she's just fickle, but as long as both theories spawn good fiction, she's happy. Most of her work features male/male romance and drama with a healthy serving of physical passion, as she enjoys both reading and writing about strong, sympathetic and sexy characters.

Clare currently has several novels sulking at that tricky chapter 3 stage and plenty of other projects in mind...she just has to find out where she left them in that frenetic, testosterone-fuelled family home.

Find details of her publications and plenty of free fiction at clarelondon.co.uk, including an invitation to her mailing list. Visit her today and say hello!



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