

THE  
*Clothier's  
Daughter*



The Hartdale Brides  
Book 1

Bronwyn Parry



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## DEDICATION

For all the teachers of literature and history at school and university who inspired and nurtured my love for both, and encouraged me to find the people of the past, especially:

Kerrie Crimmins

Helen Pilkinton

Bethwyn Wilkins

David Kent



## CHAPTER 1

*Friday August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1816, West Riding of Yorkshire*

If the rain kept falling, her business might not survive. Stretching the crick from her neck, Emma Braithwaite stared out of the warehouse window. Spattering against the glass, the rivulets of water dissected the view out over the lower buildings across the road to the waterlogged field behind them. Across the field, row upon row of tenter frames usually had long lengths of cloth stretched to dry on them, but in this unending wet they all remained empty. On the hillside beyond the tenter fields, beyond the stream that gushed down from the fells, the new steam-powered cotton manufactory belched out smoke, darker than the grey of the clouds.

She closed her eyes against the depressing sight and concentrated on listening instead to the rhythmic sounds of the drawloom at work in the room behind her. The thunk of the treadles alternating, the wooden clatter of the shafts, the brushing of the hundreds of threads as they passed each other, and the murmured counting of Tom the drawboy, sitting on top of the loom pulling the batches of pattern threads as Jacob the weaver threw the shuttle and beat each weft thread into place.

Familiar sounds, sounds she'd known since childhood. As a small girl, she'd watched the drawloom weavers at work, awed by the delicate patterns that slowly emerged, thread by fine thread. In her innocence, she'd envied the drawboys, perched up high, pulling the

CORDS that manipulated the pattern threads. She hadn't understood then that few children lived in large houses, that many had to work full days to earn a wage for their families instead of playing with dolls and dressing in pretty clothes as she did.

But in her childhood there'd been six drawlooms working full-time in this uppermost floor of Braithwaite and Co's warehouse, each loom producing fine figured worsted textiles for clothing and furnishings. Now five stood idle, the hand-made worsted fabrics no longer able to compete with the much cheaper, factory-produced cotton textiles. Dozens of other weavers still worked for Braithwaite and Co, on simpler looms out in farmhouses and cottages across the valleys, but fewer than there used to be.

And now it was her responsibility to continue the company founded by her great-grandfather, to oversee production and manage the business to protect the livelihoods of the weavers, spinners, dyers and finishers who had relied on Braithwaite and Co for decades. Her responsibility, alone. Until her brother returned from Canada. If he returned from Canada.

EMMA turned away from the window and from that unproductive chain of thought and returned to the table where she'd spread the pattern book alongside the warehouse ledger. With its large windows facing south, the weaving loft had better light than her father's office on the floor below, and she sometimes brought her work up here.

She gently touched the small samples of fabrics in the open pattern book. Jacob, about to complete a thirty-yard length of figured cloth, needed to know what design to weave next. With its record of the firm's designs, the pattern book offered a multitude of possibilities, but the ledger contained Emma's lists of the bales of wool fabric stacked in the warehouse rooms on the ground floor. Potentially hundreds, maybe a thousand, pounds worth of woven goods, if only the weather would allow for the dyeing and finishing processes so that they could be sold. If they could be sold.

But until that happened, they only represented hundreds of pounds of debt. The combers and spinners and dyers must be paid. Jacob and all the weavers must be paid for their completed pieces.

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Mr. Hargraves, the factor, and the warehouse lads must be paid their wages. So did the two clerks and the copy boy in the main office on the middle floor of the warehouse. She had little spare money to pay any of them.

If the fabrics Mr. Hargraves had taken to Halifax today for tomorrow's market in the Piece Hall sold for a good price, she could pay the wages for this week. She should not ask Jacob to begin another piece until she could pay him for this one. But if he had no work, his family would go hungry.

Her head ached from constant calculations, constant decision making, constant worry.

She pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders. The persistent damp weather chilled the air despite the fire in the fireplace at the end of the loft.

The fire that seemed to be smoking. The smell tickled her nose and the drawboy coughed. Glancing across to the closed door of the stairwell, she saw a very faint haze of smoke drifting in the air.

At the other end of the room from the fireplace.

Her chair scraped loudly on the wooden floor but Jacob the weaver was already alerted and on his feet.

"There's a fire," she said. "But where?" She checked the fireplace but the wisps of smoke were too elusive and she couldn't tell exactly which way they came from.

Emma stood in the middle of the room, slowly turning, listening, searching for the entry point of the smoke. Where was the fire? *Where?* Was it merely the fireplace in the office below them smoking badly? Or was there a fire in the warehouse on the ground floor, packed with bales of fabric? In the stables adjoining the building, on the other side of the stone wall?

"I'll check downstairs, Miss Braithwaite," Jacob said, opening the door to the landing.

A roar of sound, air, heat and flame shook the building, throwing Jacob backwards, making the shafts of the loom clatter. The floor seemed to move and Emma staggered back against the table, sending her inkwell crashing to the floor. And all around her, a shower of ash

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and burning embers fell, on to the looms, on to her accounts, on to the wooden floor, and on to her and Jacob and Tom.

She could not think of how or why. No time to make sense of it. Because Jacob lay still, flames leapt through a hole in the wall between the hay loft of the stable and the stairwell, and the old timbers of the stairs were catching alight.

Young Tom helped her drag Jacob away from the doorway, and using the door as a shield she slammed it shut against the heat and flames. And against their only exit from the top floor of the warehouse.

Tom stamped out embers and smoldering clumps of hay with his feet, and she dragged her shawl off her shoulders to beat out sparks.

They might have little time before the fire spread, through floorboards, walls, roof beams, into this room. She had to think of some way they could get out of the danger. The lads in the office below, one floor up from the ground, could probably jump out the window without major hurt, assuming they were uninjured, or rescuers could bring a ladder, but the windows here, ten feet higher, could not be reached by a ladder.

Tom stared at her, just nine years old, his eyes wide with terror. "Are we going to burn, Miss Braithwaite?"

"No." She wouldn't let him die. "Open the window. The far one. I'll get you out of here."

Somehow. There had to be something up here long enough to tie around Tom so she could lower him to the ground.

But there'd be no way to get the unconscious Jacob out through the window and she wouldn't be able to bear his weight, to lower him safely. And no way could she leave him to die.

~

After more than a day travelling in the jolting mail coach from London, Adam took pleasure in riding the last eight miles from Halifax on a hired horse, despite the steady, soaking rain. His greatcoat and beaver hat protected him from the worst of the damp,



and the fresh air and solitude after the close confines of the coach made up for the minimal discomfort of the weather. Rain no longer rated as an annoyance after his years away at war.

The hired mare trotted along with an easy gait. Easier than Adam's mind. The mix of familiar landmarks and signs of major change made his thoughts see-saw between a sense of *home* and the unsettling sensation of strangeness, of being a stranger. Less than three miles from his family home at Rengarth, and he no longer belonged, no longer recognized some places.

Here, in the small town of Hartdale, a new bridge crossed the now-finished canal that flowed south from the fells into the river. Two new factories and several new warehouses lined its banks.

Smoke billowed out from the factory chimneys, dark against the grey of the clouds, and the noise of the steam-powered machinery vibrated in the air.

Only those with urgent purpose ventured out into the rain, and Adam saw few people about, even in the market square. They dashed from the shelter of one building to another, under an umbrella, or with coat collars pulled high and heads bowed under hats. No-one recognized him. No-one even looked twice at him, more concerned with keeping dry than acknowledging passers-by.

But as he passed the Hartdale Arms, a shout caught more than one person's attention.

Adam didn't hear the words the first time over his horse's hoof beats, but he heard the urgency, and he heard them the second time as a young man raced down the road.

*"Fire! Get the fire cart!"*

Adam kicked the mare forward, around the crook in the street. The grey smoke he'd assumed rose from a chimney came instead from a warehouse, and flames leapt up from behind it.

Josiah Braithwaite's warehouse. And a neatly-dressed lad leaned out from an upstairs window, calling for help, for a ladder, for water.

A boy—a child—struggled to lift a full bucket of water from a water butt almost his height.

Adam swung off his horse, lifted the bucket, and tossed the reins

to boy. "Take her to the Arms," he ordered, as if the boy was one of his soldiers. "Tell them Major Caldwell says to bring every ladder and bucket they can find. And stout ropes."

Still puffing from exertion, the boy's grimy face was wide-eyed with excitement and trepidation. Just a child, not a soldier. "Johnno's gone for the fire cart."

Adam softened his voice. "Good. We'll need them and more. Hurry now."

Underneath the window, Adam called up to the desperate lad above, "How many of you up there?"

"Three here, sir. But-"

Someone near Adam took up the shout of "*Fire! Get the fire cart!*" and he barely made out the trapped lad's panicked words, "-Braithwaite is in the loft."

Josiah Braithwaite? Or his son, Matthew? It didn't matter. Adam sized up the height of the building and swore. Too tall for a ladder to reach the weaving loft.

He remembered the basic layout of the warehouse from the one time he'd been inside it and rapidly assessed the situation. The entrance at one end, off the street, leading into the showroom and the warehouse rooms with all the bales of finished and unfinished fabrics. The stairs to the middle floor led to the large counting room where the clerks worked, with Josiah Braithwaite's office at the opposite end of the building from the stairs. Above the counting room, the weavers' loft, with large south-facing windows for light. At the rear of the building, the double warehouse doors opened on to the courtyard, with the stables to the side, abutting the warehouse.

The main roar of the fire seemed to be coming from the back, from the stables, but thick smoke swirled in front of the window glass near the main entrance door, pierced by the orange-red flicker of flames.

No way out through there. A decade of war and too many burning buildings had taught the harsh lesson that to even open that door would send a rush of air to feed the flames into an inferno.

He pushed aside memories of a burning farmhouse and the

screams of trapped soldiers. Not here. Not today. The continued rain and damp must reduce the heat and power of the fire. He would get these people out of the building, alive.

He slipped into battle readiness—focused only on the job to do, allowing no time for feelings or fear—and gave orders because there was no-one else to take charge.

“Get into Mr. Braithwaite’s office,” he called up to the young clerk. “Close the door and open the window.”

The clerk coughed and disappeared from view. On the top floor, someone shattered some of the panes of the end window. He couldn’t see who.

Several men with buckets rushed up the street. “Don’t open the front door!” Adam ordered. “Go round the back. Do what you can there to douse the flames.” There’d be water butts and troughs for horses around the stable yard. Not much hope for any horses in the stables, but he could hear none, and hoped there were none.

A woman hurried from a house across the street awkwardly carrying a ladder, tears running down her cheeks. “Please sir,” she gasped, “My boy...my boy’s in there.”

With a brief word of reassurance, Adam set the ladder against the wall of the warehouse. It barely reached the window of Braithwaite’s office on the middle floor. But it was close enough. Close enough for the clerks in the counting room. Nowhere near close enough for Braithwaite and anyone else on the top level.

The woman—sensible despite her anxiety—held the base of the ladder steady while he quickly ascended and hauled himself in through the window. The three clerks—two youths, and one boy around twelve years old—gathered close to give him little-needed help. They’d had the sense to close the door between Braithwaite’s office and the larger room and although smoke scratched his eyes, the flames had not yet reached here. They had several ledger books and the cash box stacked by the window.

The tallest of the clerks pushed the boy forward. “William must go first, sir.”

Adam nodded agreement and lifted the lad to the window sill,

holding his arms while William felt with his feet for the top rung of the ladder. The boy's mother called encouragement and William made his way down to be hauled into a close embrace. As Adam assisted one of the clerks over the window ledge, a man took the goodwife's place, holding the ladder steady.

The younger clerk was half-way down when the man at the base shouted, looking up, and Adam twisted to see above the window. Two small legs dangled, one shoe hanging loose, as someone in the loft lowered a child, inch by inch. As the legs came level, Adam grabbed them, guiding the swaying child towards the ladder. A wide strip of fabric wrapped around his chest, tied in a knot almost thicker than the skinny body, long ends of threads hanging. Braithwaite must have cut a web from a loom. Good thinking. Up to thirty yards on a piece of cloth, long enough to reach the ground.

While the boy—young, maybe eight or nine years old—clung to the ladder, Adam tugged the knot loose so the cloth could be used for another person.

“Down you go, lad. You're safe now.”

The boy's lip trembled. “Miss Braithwaite and Uncle Jacob—you'll save them, won't you?”

His words shattered Adam's detached focus. “*Miss Braithwaite? Miss Braithwaite is up there?*”

He must have said it forcefully, because the boy barely nodded before he scampered down the ladder.

“Yes, sir,” the clerk behind Adam said. “Miss Emma Braithwaite. She's the senior partner now, sir.”

Barely hearing anything past the confirmation, Adam leaned half his body out the window, straining to see upwards.

“Emma!” The length of fabric obscured his view and he pulled it out of his way. There was no-one at the window. She was somewhere inside there, in the smoke and the fire. “*Emma!*”

He saw movement, and then her face, almost as pale as the white lace of her collar. She saw him but with the smoke all around she didn't recognize him, didn't know him.

“I can't lift Jacob,” she called down to him, to those below, panic

sharpening her voice. "I can't lift him and I won't be able to hold his weight."

He closed his fist around the fabric, gripping it tight. "Fasten the cloth to a beam or something heavy. I'm coming up."

She properly saw him then, visibly startled. "Adam?" She shook her head, urgency overpowering her astonishment. "I can't. There's only the loom, and it's not heavy enough. It just moves."

Adam swore. He strode across and opened the office door so that he could check the door to the stairs, twenty feet away, near the front wall of the building. The smoke flowed under it, but he could see no flames licking the edge of the door itself. At the other end of the wall, where it met the back wall, the paper curled and smoked, but not near the door.

He returned to the open window and called up again, "Stay near the window, Emma. I'm coming to get you."

He still wore his great coat, thick wool wet through after hours in the rain. Woolen breeches, leather boots, leather riding gloves. His beaver hat had fallen to the floor when he'd clambered through the window, and he swept it up, jamming it on his head as he pulled his damp cravat up over his face.

The clerk began to follow as he crossed the room. "Sir, you're not going to..."

"Yes. Get down that ladder, man. Now."

The metal of the door handle was warm through his gloves, but not searing hot. Not yet. With his ear to the door he held his breath and listened. Over the sound of his heart beats, the harsh crackling of fire eating wood, but not right outside the door. He opened it cautiously, keeping behind it. Smoke rushed in, and noise and heat, but not flames.

Immediately to his left, the stairs rose from the small landing to the upper floor. But there was a hole in the back wall, near the top landing, and the stairs leading to the lower floors were well alight, flames leaping upwards, and thick, choking smoke filling his nose and throat despite the small protection of his loosened cravat.

Flames worked on the bannisters, and some of the steps smoked,

small pockets of flames breaking through.

He could make it. He had to make it.

He sucked in a breath and took two paces backwards, then ran into the hell of flames and smoke. Up the stairs, two by two, heat singeing the cotton around his face, throwing himself forward as the wooden treads shifted under his boots, reaching the top landing and grasping the door handle as the supports below the flight of stairs gave way.

With his weight yanking the door handle down, he swung himself inside the loft, slamming the door shut against the roar of the flames as the stairs collapsed to the floors below.

The floor directly beneath him shook but held. His lungs screamed for air and he coughed violently, staggering a few feet.

“Adam!” From the far end of the room, Emma rushed towards him but he drew enough breath to meet her part-way, taking her arm to guide her back to the fresh air coming through the open window. If the flames burst through—*when* the flames burst through—he wanted her already gone, already safe.

The weaver lay unconscious, near the window. A good-sized man, thick with muscle. She had done well to drag him this far.

But her attention now was on him, checking him for injury, smothering a smoldering shirt cuff with her shawl. “You shouldn’t have risked yourself, Adam. They’ll be here with the fire cart soon.” Her breath caught. “You could have died.”

“Wet wool is armor,” he said. “But we must hurry. I’ll lower you down, then him.”

“No. Jacob goes first. He has a family to support. And it will need both of us to lift him.”

Adam knew her well enough not to argue. He knelt beside the weaver, checking for signs of life. Blood seeped from the man’s head, but a pulse tapped evenly against his fingers.

Emma had already hauled back the length of worsted fabric, and had one end tied to the loom, the other near the man. As Adam lifted him by the shoulders, she wrapped it around his chest, the knot she tied thick enough to give a little support to his drooping head.

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Flames broke through the wall at the far end of the room, and something else collapsed with a resounding crash. Choking smoke billowed into the room.

She gasped but didn't scream, focused on helping him to lift the dead weight of the weaver up onto the window sill, his legs over the edge. She guided the weaver's body as Adam stripped off his gloves and gripped the makeshift rope, the taut, bunched fabric harsh against his hands.

He battled against the desire to let the man drop quickly so that Emma could go. But to drop him too fast might kill him, if his injuries weren't already deadly. Inch by inch, foot by foot, it seemed to take forever. In reality, it might have been a minute. The flames had hold of the far wall.

"They've got him," Emma said, and the dead weight suddenly lessened as the man reached waiting arms below.

"Untie him," Adam bellowed through the window. While he hauled the makeshift rope hand over hand back up, Emma wrapped two thick ledger books in her shawl.

"Leave those," he said, as he readied to tie the cloth around her.

She held the bundle tight to her chest. "No. I need the records of debtors and creditors. And the pattern book has our history."

Logical, and it took no more time to save them than it did to save her. He passed the cloth around her to tie it over the books, the cloth helping to hold them in place. Her skirts hampered her as he helped her climb to the window.

He put a hand on her shoulder to guide her. "Back out. Use your feet against the wall. Don't look down." He gripped the makeshift rope with both hands and braced himself as she maneuvered out the window.

Another few seconds, another minute, and she would be safe.

He wasn't sure if he had much longer than that to get out alive himself.

~

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Hands steadied her as she came close to the ground and she reached with her feet for solidity. Above her, Adam's face strained to lower her steadily, his gaze never leaving her.

Adam. Adam Caldwell. That he should be here, now, after eight years...

Her feet found the cobblestones and she steadied herself with a hand against the warehouse wall.

Voices shouted all around, people crowding her, and someone took the ledgers from her but she could only think of Adam, still up there in the burning loft, and she tugged at the thick knot around her chest, coughing in the wet, cold air, sobbing as she struggled to undo the now damp cloth.

Work-worn hands came into her vision, gently pushing hers away to take over the task. Goodwife Harris, the mother of young William, the new copy boy.

"It's all right, Miss Braithwaite. I'll get you out of this." Her fingers worked nimbly as she soothed with chatter. "Someone said that it's Captain Caldwell up there. The old Earl's son, isn't he?"

"Major Caldwell." She'd read the notice in the Gazette, after Waterloo. His promotion, and his appointment to the Duke of Wellington's staff in the Paris embassy.

Freed from the twisted cloth, Emma allowed herself to be drawn back, away from the warehouse, away from the heat and danger. The warehouse door hung open, half off its hinges, flames flicking out above it. A chain of men with buckets kept a constant pace, throwing water at it, held back by the heat, the liquid only sometimes hitting the flames in a hiss of steam.

Horses hooves clattered up the street, sending bystanders scattering. The fire cart, at last. Only one, in this small town. Owned by the insurance company in Halifax, to whom Emma paid the premium sum to guarantee the services of the fire cart. Guaranteed, if not prompt. It seemed like hours since the fire had burst through from the stables. But the men on the cart began pumping before the horses had fully halted.

At the high window, Adam straddled the window sill, maneuvering



to get a good hold of the cloth rope. She could just see the shape of the loom, drawn hard up against the wall. Good, it should hold there for him. He swung his body over the sill and began a slow descent, hand over hand, his feet walking down the wall.

Emma breathed out and looked away. He had to make it down safely, without falling, without fire billowing out through the window or walls. She couldn't bear to see it if anything went wrong.

"Miss Braithwaite!" Ned, the senior of the two young clerks, pushed his way through to her.

"You're all unhurt?" she asked. "You and Theo and Will are all safe?"

"Yes, Miss. We all got out fine. And Jacob woke up just now. He's spoken quite clearly, Miss, and he can move all right. They've taken him to his sister's."

Relief made her head spin. They were all safe, all her employees. No-one left in that inferno. She made herself think straight. She still had responsibilities to see to. "I'll go there. Ned, find the constable and tell him where I am. He will want a report."

"Out of my way!" The commanding voice parted the crowd as a tall, well-dressed man shouldered his way through. Emma smothered a groan. Not Robert. Not here. Not now. With an effort, she straightened her shoulders to face him.

"Cousin Emma! I heard... Good Lord, you *were* in there!" He jabbed a finger at Ned. "Don't just stand around, man, go and fetch a doctor this instant!"

She took a breath to protest but the sudden air scratched her raw throat and she coughed, again and again, unable to stop. Made giddy by the wracking convulsions, her head became heavy and the street beneath her feet tilted this way and that.

She would not faint in front of Robert. She would *not*. But she could scarcely draw breath, her lungs screamed for air, and black spots danced in front of her eyes.

"Smelling salts!" she heard Robert call. "Someone fetch some smelling salts!"

The mere thought of the biting aroma of the salts made her throat

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close further. She tried to shake her head, but the spots in her vision swelled into darkness. Her head hit Robert's arm as she collapsed.