

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Hull, 1860**

Harriet trudged up High Street towards the George and Dragon. How she hated this job! The customers with their stinking breath and coarse hands on her backside, whom she had to push away with a smile and quizzical eyebrow so as not to upset them, so that they didn't get nasty or complain about her to the landlord. The landlord wasn't so bad; he saw what was going on and didn't blame her for it, but his wife was a harridan.

Still, it was a job and they were hard to come by. She sighed. I suppose I must count my blessings and be thankful that I managed to find extra work at 'hostelry, she thought, but even so I don't see how I can manage to pay 'rent, not if we want to eat. If I'd been nicer to 'mill foreman he might have kept me on full time, but his wandering hands are worse than 'hostelry customers', and him with a wife and four bairns. So he punished me and has put me on half time, until I change my mind, which I won't. Instead, she had taken the job at the George, even

though she didn't like being out late in the evening when her mother was so ill. The older woman hadn't eaten for days but even so she still retched, although she brought up nothing but green bile. I'm going to ask if I can leave early tonight. I wish . . . what do I wish?

She turned into the yard. This was an ancient inn, one of the oldest in Hull and in the oldest street in the town, set close by the River Hull where the November fog drifted in from the sea and floated amongst the houses and alleyways. I don't wish for riches, but it would be nice to have enough to eat, and not have to worry about paying 'landlord, and – to have a good man in my life, one who spoke softly, and would look after me and my mother. And I would tek care of him. Was there such a man, she wondered.

Two weeks earlier a stranger had come into the inn. He wasn't local; she knew all the regular customers by sight if not by name, and she hadn't seen this man before. He'd been polite, asked for food as well as ale, and she'd thought . . . well, she'd thought that he seemed pleasant. He'd asked for fresh bread as if he was used to eating good food, and although he hadn't been flippant or saucy he'd seemed interested in her, for she'd caught him glancing to see if she was wearing a wedding ring, and there'd been something he said. What was it, she thought. Something about a husband. That was it: had I a husband to go home to? But I didn't answer; I'm not in 'habit of discussing my life with a stranger. He was in Hull on business, he said, so he must live out

of 'district. It would be nice if he came back like he said he would, and then I might find out who he is, does he have a wife, where does he live, is he in regular work? She let out a breath of resignation. But no use daydreaming, Harriet. This is your life, such as it is.

She swung open the door. There was a bright fire burning and already men standing by it warming their backsides. The landlord's wife stood behind the bar counter with an expression so brittle it could shatter glass. 'You're late,' she said.

'I know,' Harriet replied. 'I'm sorry.'

Anger coursed through his veins. It had for as long as he could remember, though he didn't know why; but it was his retaliation, his way of dealing with what he considered to be injustice, his way of coping with long-standing rejection.

Noah Tuke rode the stallion hard, testing its health and strength. He'd bought him cheap, doing a shady deal with the owner who was pressed for money and had cursed him for his meanness. This would be Noah's second visit to Hull and when his quest was done he had no intention of ever going back to the town again.

He'd gone there seeking a wife in the middle of October, and reckoned that he might have found one. With a bit of luck and a few choice words he might get as good a bargain as he had with the stallion.

He needed a woman who could work, and although he could have gone to Goole or Brough, both nearer

to his marshland home than Hull, Goole was a new company town of no more than four or five hundred people, built for the shipping industry and attracting few women apart from the dockers' wives; and in the small community of Brough someone might have recognized the son of one of the farmers from the waterlogged wastes outside the town, and the last thing he wanted was raised eyebrows or inevitable questions of motive.

He had reckoned that a woman employed in one of the inns and hostelries of Hull would be used to long hours and drudgery; she should be young, but not so young that he'd have to teach her the facts of life. Mature, but no more than twenty-five, and presentable and attractive; not a whore, although he had no problem with previous experience, providing she was clean; and she should have no commitments. No children, no parents, no ties, and no one with claims on her. She should be looking for a chance to better herself and be prepared to leave the town and become a countrywoman.

On the first visit, he had become almost drunk in his search. He hadn't realized just how many inns and beer houses the town held. He'd gone to those that were slightly run down, the kind of place where a woman without family might apply for a job and be prepared to work for a pittance.

Some of the places he tried employed women who in his opinion were nothing more than sluts. Some of them leered at him, giving him toothless grins as they asked if he was new to the area.

'Passing through,' he would mutter, drinking his ale and moving on.

Other hostleries, crowded with seamen, were attended mainly by a landlord and occasionally by a landlord's wife, as tough and mean as they appeared to be, and he would leave swiftly without ordering a drink. The meandering High Street with its courts and alleys, the lanes running off towards the Market Place and narrow staithes leading to the River Hull, was a hotchpotch of ramshackle buildings, fine houses, barbers' shops, workshops and law offices as well as many ancient, crumbling inns. The only way he could retain a sense of direction was by keeping the tower of the Guildhall or the medieval church of St Mary's within his sight.

He had been about to give up his search and go home when he came to the stable yard of an alehouse with a sign of the George and Dragon swinging over the door. A narrow alley with the nameplate George Yard led through from the High Street into Lowgate and he decided to try his luck once more.

It was a cold night but there was a good fire burning in the grate with customers gathered round it; the bar counter was clean, as was the long table in the middle of the room. A woman in her twenties was serving ale from a jug and he saw her skilfully swerve away from a man's hand reaching beneath her skirt.

Mmm, he'd thought. Not a whore then, unless she's playing hard to get. She'd smiled at the man, but not provocatively; no doubt she'd be under orders from the landlord to be nice to the customers.

She might do, he'd thought, providing she wasn't spoken for, and he leaned on the counter and ordered a pint of their best ale. She'd spoken pleasantly, with a trace of the local accent.

'Haven't seen you before, sir,' she said. 'Are you visiting 'town?'

'Aye,' he said. 'A bit o' business here. Went on a bit late. I'll be on my way home after this. Have you got owt I can eat? I missed my supper.'

She hadn't asked him where home was, but said she could rustle up a plate of beef or ham with bread.

'Bread was fresh this morning,' she said. 'It's not stale.'

'Aye, that'll do. I'll not eat stale bread. I like my grub. Did you mek it?'

'No.' She laughed. 'Landlord's wife buys it from 'baker.'

'Bet you know how to mek it though, don't you?' He'd pushed his hat back and watched her as she took bread out of a crock under the counter, sliced it, placed it on a plate and took two thick slices of beef and ham from beneath a covered dish. He noticed she wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

'Course I do,' she said. 'My ma showed me how when I was a bairn. I don't mek it now, though. I don't have a good enough oven, and besides, 'baker's cheap enough. Mustard?' she asked.

'Aye, and plenty of it.'

He ate quickly. It would take at least two hours to get home; he'd left a note on the kitchen table to say he'd be late and reminding Fletcher not to lock him out.

'That were grand,' he commented, when he'd finished. 'I'll come again.'

'Do,' she'd nodded.

'Are you here every night? Or do you have a husband to go home to?'

She'd looked sharply at him and he wondered if he was taking things too fast; he wasn't used to dealing with women and didn't know their foibles or eccentricities, except his mother's and she didn't count.

'I'm allus here,' she told him, leaning on the counter. 'I'm lucky to be in work. Landlord's not bad, not like some I've worked for who expect you to work all 'hours God sends for onny a copper.'

He'd nodded and left it at that, leaving as soon as he'd finished his ale. She hadn't admitted to having a husband, but he was fairly sure she would have said if she had, if only to warn him off.

Although it was a long shot, she was the reason he was going back now, two weeks later. He'd been tempted to return within a week, but he didn't want to appear eager, only as if he really were there on business. Besides, he didn't want his brother to become suspicious, and he would, he muttered beneath his ragged breath. The heathen would smell a rat and begin muckraking in every dunghill he could find until he discovered what Noah was up to.

They'd had a bet; at least he had challenged Fletcher to a bet. They'd been fighting as they often did as to who should have the last word over how the farm should be run, and as they'd raged at each other their father, Nathaniel, had come out of the

house with a shotgun and fired it over their heads.

‘Get back to work, both of you,’ he’d shouted. ‘I give out orders here, nobody else.’

They’d both muttered and growled. They were grown men after all, too old to be taking orders from an old man, even if he was their father. It was that night, as they were going up to bed, that Noah had said, ‘If one of us had a wife and some bairns, that’d decide who was to run ’farm.’

Fletcher had glared at him. ‘And how would that decide? And what would Ma say to having another woman in ’house?’

Noah had shrugged. ‘Nowt,’ he said. ‘She’d have to put up wi’ it.’ He’d grinned. ‘I’ll bet you ’price of a young heifer I’ll find a wife afore you do.’

Fletcher hadn’t actually agreed to the wager and had turned away with a shrug. He generally avoided confrontation, but Noah thought he’d think about it and turn it over in his mind and decide he didn’t want to be beaten by his younger brother.

Tonight Noah rode straight into Hull’s High Street, dismounted, and walked to the inn’s stable yard. He looked about him. It was very dark and drizzling with rain, and late, about half past ten, yet there were plenty of people about. The doors of the Corn Exchange were open and groups of men were standing on the steps so he guessed there had been a meeting in progress.

There were also some youths hanging about under a street lamp that cast a sickly yellow glow on them; he eyed them up and down, ignored the ones who were making the most noise and pinpointed one



who was standing quietly, not joining in with their frivolity but listening as an outsider might.

Noah stared hard at him until the youth, as if aware of his attention, turned his head towards him. Noah indicated with his thumb that he should come over.

‘Yes, sir?’ the lad mumbled. He looked about twelve or thirteen.

‘Are you honest?’

‘Yes, sir, as much as most.’

‘Is that a yes or a no?’ Noah hissed.

The youth took a step back. ‘Erm, it’s a yes.’

‘I need somebody to look after this hoss while I attend a bit o’ business. Can you do that?’

‘Oh, yeh!’ The lad brightened up considerably. ‘I can do that all right. That’s why we’ve been hanging about here, to see if any of ’gents wanted any errands running, onny they didn’t cos they’re all on their way home.’

‘This is a valuable hoss.’ Noah stared down at him and the youth nodded. ‘If owt should happen to him . . .’ He bent down so that he was breathing into the boy’s face. ‘I’ll give you a penny now and another two when I come back, and if you’re not here or ’hoss has gone, I’ll find you and slit your throat. Do you hear me?’

The lad’s mouth dropped open, and then he closed it again. He glanced towards the crowd of lads, who were beginning to split up and wander off. He swallowed and licked his lips.

‘Yeh,’ he whispered. ‘He’ll be all right wi’ me. You can depend on it, mister. I’ll wait here in ’yard.’

Noah dropped the penny into the boy's palm and then made a slitting gesture across his own throat and a jabbing gesture with his forefinger. The boy took the reins and led the horse to the yard, away from the eyes of his mates.

Noah hitched up his coat collar and took off his hat, ran his fingers through his long dark hair and pushed open the hostelry door.

## CHAPTER TWO

The girl was behind the bar counter washing glasses; the landlord stood with one foot on a chair, talking to a customer. He put his foot down as Noah came in and wiped his hands on his apron.

‘Evening, squire,’ he said and Noah nodded.

‘Pint of your best,’ he told the girl, and she pulled him a full tankard of ale and placed it in front of him. She looked tense, a creased and pinched look about her mouth, but she thanked him civilly when he pulled coins from his pocket and scattered them on the counter.

‘Any food tonight?’ she asked, and he was flattered that she remembered.

‘No thanks. I’ve had my supper.’ He’d eaten before leaving home and had got up abruptly from the table when he’d finished; he’d put on his coat and left the house without saying where he was going, which he knew would annoy his mother.

The girl nodded vaguely and looked across at the landlord, who came across to the counter. ‘Go on then,’ he grunted. ‘Get off, but you stay longer tomorrow to mek up for it.’

‘Thank you,’ she murmured. ‘I will.’

She disappeared through a door behind the counter, reappearing a minute later wearing a shawl wrapped round her head and shoulders.

Noah drained the tankard and wiped his hand across his mouth. ‘Thanks,’ he muttered. ‘G’night!’ He walked towards the door before the girl did, so that it didn’t look too obvious that he was leaving at the same time; but when she followed him he made a show of opening the door for her and saying good night again.

He didn’t look back at her but noted which way she went, then hurried across the yard towards the youth still holding the reins.

‘You wasn’t long,’ the boy said. ‘I thought you’d be ages yet.’

‘Long enough,’ Noah muttered. ‘Here!’ He handed him two more coins.

‘Thanks, mister! Any time. I’m allus about round here.’

‘Aye, well, I don’t know if I’ll be this way again.’ But on the other hand, he thought, I might be. It might take a bit longer than I expected to capture fair lady.

She had cut down the alley which led into Lowgate, a much wider street than the High Street, and he guessed that a woman would probably feel safer there amongst the traffic and people than on the darker High Street, so close to the river and its narrow lanes.

He saw her a few yards in front of him, walking quite swiftly and purposefully. He led the horse

after her, and when he was close enough for her to hear the clatter of hooves she turned her head as if to check who was behind her.

'Hello!' he called. 'I'm not following you. I'm on my way home.'

She turned her head again, but nervously, he thought, and he spoke again.

'Didn't I just see you in 'George and Dragon?'

She turned fully this time, pausing in her stride. 'You might have done.'

'Am I on 'right road to get out of town? I don't know Hull very well.'

She paused again and answered. 'It depends where you want to be.'

'Near Brough. It's alongside 'Humber.'

'Sorry, I don't know. Is it east or west? You can meet up with 'toll road if you're going out to Holderness, or when you get to Blackfriargate you can go west on 'road to Hessle.'

'That'll do me then,' he said cheerfully. 'Do you mind my walking alongside you?'

'No,' she said. 'I'd be glad of it. It'll mebbe stop me getting pestered by drunks.'

'Ah, yeh,' he said. 'I suppose you'll get that in a town. Where I live it's very quiet; women can walk safely at night.'

'Can they? That must be a relief to them.'

'Have you far to go?'

'Blackfriargate,' she said. 'One of 'streets off it.' She glanced at him. 'Just past King Billy.'

He shook his head. 'You've lost me.'

'King Billy's statue! It's at 'bottom of Market

Place. You can see it from here, look. It shines cos it's made of gold. We live behind 'Shambles. You'd know where you were by 'stink of it, specially in summer.'

*We*, he considered. So who else lives there? 'You must be near to 'river then, are you?'

She sighed. 'Yes. Houses get flooded at least twice a year. It's where 'River Hull flows into 'Humber. Confluence, I think it's called.'

She's not stupid then, he thought. 'Did you finish early at 'inn tonight?' he asked.

'Aye, I did. My ma's sick. I didn't like to leave her on her own, but I need my wages. I expect 'landlord'll dock them, though. He'll not pay me for when I'm not there.'

His spirits dropped. Damn and blast, he swore beneath his breath. 'What's up wi' your ma?'

'Don't know. She's been sick for weeks; can't hold any food down. We can't afford 'doctor.' She sighed again. 'Don't know what I'll do if she doesn't get any better.'

'Haven't you any relatives who can look after her while you're at work?'

She shook her head. 'Nobody. My father's dead. I'm onny one left out of five bairns. Two of my brothers were lost at sea. My sister died when she was a babby and my eldest brother jiggered off to Australia or somewhere.'

'As an immigrant or a convict?' he joked.

'An immigrant,' she said seriously, not hearing his humour. 'About ten years ago. Not heard a word since. My ma's allus asking about him and I make up

this tale that he's a farmer and will send for us when he's made his fortune.'

'What's his name?'

'Miles, same as mine. Leonard Miles. If you ever come across him, send him to see me, will you?' Her voice was bitter. 'I'd like to tell him a thing or two.'

'I will, Miss Miles. But what's your first name so that I can tell him his sister was asking about him?'

She laughed then. 'I reckon pigs will fly afore that happens.' She stopped at the corner of another street. 'But I'm Harriet. This is Blackfriargate, where I turn off. Thanks for walking me home.'

'I'll come wi' you,' he said. 'Tek you to your door.'

'There's no need,' she began, but he insisted and she didn't argue as he followed her, with the stallion trailing behind him.

He could smell the blood and guts from the butchers' shambles as they passed, just as she had said, and he could imagine the stench and the flies in the hot summer months.

'You must wish to get away from here,' he said. 'It's dark, too. How do you find your way about?'

'Lived here most of my life,' she said. 'Know it wi' my eyes shut.'

They went down one alley and then another cutting across it. There was another smell now, sweeter than that of the offal sweepings from the butchery.

'Malt,' she said, even though he hadn't asked. 'There's a malt kiln near here. I quite like 'smell of that.'

'Where are we?' he asked, thinking that if he didn't have the name, he'd never find the place again.

'Robson's Entry.' She turned into another narrow entry packed close with terraced housing. A single lamp post stood at the entrance, shedding a dim light but illuminating the poverty. 'We're here. Third door along. Thank you,' she said again. 'I can't ask you in. We've onny got one room.'

'One room!' He was aghast. Even though his motives were not entirely innocent, he was stunned to think that anyone could live in such a place, cheek by jowl with their neighbours. 'Go and check if your ma's all right. I'll wait here in case you need any help.'

Harriet turned to look at him. She seemed astonished that anyone would care, and of course he didn't, at least not for the reasons that she might be thinking. 'There's nowt to be done even if I do need help,' she muttered. 'I told you, there's no money for a doctor.'

'Go on,' he said. 'Go and see.'

Her lips parted as she considered and he wondered what it would be like to kiss her. Bet not many men have done that, he thought, and yet I'd guess she's ripe for it.

She turned away again and opened the door, which wasn't locked. Nowt to steal, he thought.

He put his ear to the door, which she hadn't shut completely, and heard her voice murmuring, 'Ma, it's me, Harriet. Are you all right? Ma? Are you awake? I'll light a candle. Fire's gone out.'

He pressed his ear closer and then pushed the door a little wider and peered through the crack. It was pitch black inside and he couldn't make out any



shapes; then he heard the rasp of a match and saw a short spark of light that instantly went out. She cursed softly and struck again. This time the flame caught and he saw her hand held to a candle stub. In a moment a flickering glow revealed a low bed, with Harriet bent over it.

‘Ma,’ she said again. ‘Are you awake? Speak to me.’

No sound came from the bed, and he held his breath. He hadn’t gone through all this palaver for the old woman to be sleeping soundly when he’d hoped she’d snuffed it.

He moved away from the door as Harriet straightened her back and turned. ‘Are you still there?’ she whispered.

‘Yeh. Is she all right?’

‘I don’t know. I’m worried.’ She came to the door and put her hand to her throat. ‘I don’t know what to do.’ She gave a little huff of breath. ‘I don’t even know your name; why am I bothering you? You don’t know us from Adam or Eve.’

There was a catch in her voice and he heard her fear.

‘Noah Tuke,’ he said. ‘Do you want me to come in? I’ll tie ’hoss up.’

‘Would you? I’ve no right to ask, but . . .’

He hooked the reins over an iron shoe scraper near the doorstep and stepped inside. ‘Have you no more light than this?’

‘Just another candle stub,’ she said. ‘I have to be sparing wi’ them.’

He leaned over the bed and saw the woman; her face was wrinkled and sickly yellow, but he thought

he saw a slight rise and fall of the blanket that covered her.

‘Don’t you have a neighbour or anybody, another woman, who’d come and tek a look at her?’

‘There’s a woman my ma used to know who lives in ’next entry. Ma and her used to stop and talk, in ’days when Ma went out, but I’ve not seen her in months. Everybody else is like us, living hand to mouth, wi’ no time even to stop ’n’ pass ’time of day.’

‘Why don’t you go and see if she’ll come? You can’t stop here on your own and it wouldn’t be right for me to offer.’ He made it sound regrettable that he couldn’t, because he was a male. ‘But I’ll stop wi’ your ma till you get back.’

Her voice broke as she said, ‘I’ve allus been scared that summat like this might happen. Are you sure you don’t mind? I don’t like to – but thank you. I’ll not be long. No more’n five minutes unless she’s in bed, which she might be. It’s late.’

He nodded. ‘Tek your time. If she can’t come, then we’ll think o’ summat else. It’s cold in here. Shall I try to light ’fire?’

She shook her head as she went to the door. ‘No wood, no coal, to light it.’

What a life, he thought. Purgatory. She’d be well out of it. He gazed down at the woman in the bed, her head on a thin pillow. They both would. He saw a flicker of eyelids and, startled, he looked closer. The eyes blinked and her mouth moved. She licked her lips and tried to speak.

‘Harriet?’ It was a mere croak. Her eyes opened wider; they had probably been grey or blue once,

but were now glazed, filmy and opaque. 'Who are you?' He could just make out her words. 'Are you . . . a doctor?'

'Yes,' he said. 'I've come to mek you better.'

She gave a shallow sigh and nodded her thanks.

He put his hand beneath her head and gently pulled out the pillow. 'I heard that son o' yours in Australia is doing very nicely, Mrs Miles; Leonard, isn't it? Now, I want you to close your eyes for me.'

She obeyed, giving a little smile, which he covered with the pillow and gently but firmly pressed with both his hands.

## CHAPTER THREE

Harriet sat by her mother's bed, still unable to believe that she had gone so swiftly from this world into the next. It had been three nights since the stranger had walked home with her and offered to wait whilst she ran for a neighbour. He'd been sitting by the hearth when she returned with Mrs Chambers, who had taken one look at her mother and pronounced her dead. He'd risen from the chair and exclaimed, 'No! I swear I heard her make a sound not five minutes since.'

Mrs Chambers had nodded solemnly. 'Her last words, sir, bidding farewell to this life on earth.'

Harriet had moaned, and Mrs Chambers had patted her hand and said her mother was ill no more. 'Not that that's much comfort to you now, m'dear, but what sort o' life was left for her?'

Noah something or other had risen to leave. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Sorry to have met you under such circumstances. Is there owt I can do?'

There wasn't, but she thanked him for asking. Mrs Chambers said she would see to everything, and when Harriet had returned from showing the

stranger back to the Market Place the woman had smoothed her mother's hair and folded her hands across her chest and she looked very peaceful, less strained than she had done in the last few weeks.

A doctor had called the following morning to write a death certificate and Harriet had taken the rest of the day off work. She sat in the chair all day and night with a blanket wrapped round her, not even bothering to go out and search for kindling to light a fire.

She had gone back to the mill the next day to find that her hours had been cut again, and when she told the foreman she hadn't come in the day before because her mother had just died, he simply said that if she was living alone she wouldn't need as much money as women with families. Then she had returned to the George that evening to find that the landlord had found someone else to take her place. Again she explained, pleading that she needed the money, but he merely shrugged and said, 'Life's a bitch whichever way you look at it, but I dare say you'll survive.'

Survival, she thought, that's all it is; there's nothing else in life, no hope, no money. How do I pay 'rent on less wages? They were already in arrears. She had been buying extra milk and bread to try to build up her mother's strength, but the poor woman had not been able to keep it down. After tomorrow, she thought. After the burial tomorrow, perhaps then I'll be able to think straight.

Harriet had been to Holy Trinity church to ask about interment, praying that her mother could be

buried in the churchyard rather than be taken elsewhere. She had heard that the churchyard was full and the vicar had confirmed it, but he was a kind man and knew full well the situation of many of his parishioners.

‘We’re not churchgoers, sir,’ Harriet had told him. ‘But my mother was a good woman, a true Christian in every sense. She would never have passed by on the other side of anyone in need.’

He’d nodded sympathetically and told her that he would find a place for her mother and there would be no charge, if she could raise a penny for a candle to light her mother’s way to heaven.

She’d done that, taking it from the wages the landlord had given her for the night her mother died, when she had left early. He hadn’t knocked anything off and she’d thanked him, asking him to think of her if the job became vacant again. He’d hesitated and then bent to murmur, ‘It’s ’missis, you see, Harriet. She’s a bit jealous of how ’customers like you; she’s noticed that ’men like a bit o’ banter and you don’t seem to mind, even though you keep ’em at arms’ length.’

Harriet was astonished. Men were men and they tried to get their hands up the skirts of most women, but not of course the one that the landlord’s wife was wearing. It’s not that I was in ’front row when looks were given out, she considered. I’m no beauty; quite plain, really. My hair is of no special colour – mouse, mebbe – my skin’s pale and my mouth’s too wide, though my teeth are good. What’s up wi’ woman that she should be jealous o’ me?

There were no other mourners when she and Mrs Chambers stood in the churchyard over a shallow grave whilst the vicar uttered a few words, which gave her little comfort. He had asked her when she first went to see him if there were any other family members buried in the churchyard. She had shaken her head, and then remembered her baby sister. Surprisingly, he had found the details and the approximate site – for there was no headstone – and so Maria Miles was laid to rest with her long-departed daughter.

‘They’ll be company for each other,’ Mrs Chambers offered encouragingly as they walked back down the Market Place, but Harriet’s forehead creased as she considered how that could be.

Realizing that she would have to find more work, she trawled around the public houses the following day and into the evening. She’d washed her hair beneath the communal pump, clenching her teeth as the cold water froze her scalp, and then rubbed it dry on a piece of old towelling and fastened it in the nape of her neck. Then before she opened any alehouse doors she pinched her cheeks to give them colour, lifted her chin and tried to look bright eyed as she asked if there was any work available.

There was none until the last place she tried before returning home; it was a miserable hovel, one room only, not much more than the size of her own, with one table and ale drawn from a cask. It was kept by an unkempt man who leered at her, and said he might be able to offer her one night a week. She babbled that she would consider it and backed away.

As she stepped into the street she almost crashed into someone passing by.

‘Hello,’ he said. ‘I’ve been looking for you.’

‘Who is it?’ She stepped back into the doorway, but the space was confined and she felt trapped.

‘Noah Tuke,’ he said. ‘We met—’

‘Oh!’ She breathed out. She could barely see his face, it was so dark in this corner. ‘Sorry, I couldn’t see. It’s – well, there are all sorts of odd coves about. You have to be careful.’

‘I went looking for you at ‘George and Dragon,’ he said. ‘I was wondering how you’ve been since your mother died. Landlord’s wife said you’d left.’

‘I didn’t leave,’ she said indignantly. ‘I was given ‘sack! Landlord’s wife didn’t care for me, it seems.’

‘So are you working here?’ He looked curiously at the planked door and grimy window.

‘Not if I can help it.’ Her voice was bitter. ‘But sometimes beggars can’t be choosers.’

‘Do you fancy summat to eat?’ he asked. ‘I’ve missed my supper again. I’d have had it at ‘George but ‘beef was curling at ‘edges and I didn’t like ‘look of it!’

Harriet hesitated. What did he want in return for a bit of bread and meat? She was hungry, but not that hungry. It was a long time since she’d been with a man and then it had been because of fondness and not because she was down on her luck as she was now.

‘What do you say?’ he asked. ‘There’s no ulterior motive. Well . . .’ It was his turn to hesitate and he stared right at her. ‘There might be, but I’ll discuss it wi’ you first.’



'Discuss what?' she asked sharply. 'I'm not on 'game, nor ever will be.'

His reply was equally brusque. 'That's not what I'm asking. But there's summat which might be beneficial to us both. But I'm not saying owt down here in this miserable alley. Will you come an' have summat to eat and we can talk face to face?'

That was fair enough, she thought. There'd be no harm in that, and if I don't like what he's proposing then at least I'll have had my supper.

She led him towards a tavern off the Market Place where reputedly the food was wholesome and the ale good. She ordered a meat pie and a glass of ale and he did the same. The smells coming from the kitchen were delicious and she tried not to wolf the food down when it came; the meat was tender, the crust crumbly and the gravy thick. It was served with mashed potatoes and cabbage and she couldn't remember ever having eaten so well.

Noah Tuke eyed her when she was finished and said, 'Do you fancy some apple pie? You seemed hungry.'

She swallowed a small belch and patted her chest. 'I haven't been able to eat since my ma died.' She refrained from telling him she had barely enough money to buy food. 'I didn't have 'heart to cook or eat whilst she was still in 'room wi' me.'

He suppressed a shudder. 'Is 'funeral over wi' now?'

'Yes,' she said softly. 'It's done. So what did you want to talk about?' Better get it over with, she thought.

He turned first to the landlord and ordered two portions of apple pie and two more glasses of ale, and she considered that money or lack of it didn't seem to be a problem to him. Is he softening me up for some purpose?

He waited for the ale to be brought and put his elbows on the table. 'You'll think this odd,' he began. 'And I suppose it is, and you don't know me, but then neither do I know you, so we're on equal footing in that respect. I'd guess that you're on your uppers. Any woman who has to work at night must be. I suppose you work during 'day as well?'

She nodded reluctantly. 'At one of 'flour mills.' She did not tell him that she'd been put on short time.

'An' I gather that you've no husband or bairns either?'

'What's this leading up to?' she broke in. 'Why would you be wanting my history?'

'Cos I want everything straight in my head before I say owt. Your ma's just died, your brother's gone abroad, and you've got nobody. Am I right?'

Her eyes filled with tears and her mouth trembled just as a serving girl put the apple pie in front of them. Harriet stared down at it and knew that no matter how she wanted it, it would choke her if she tried to eat.

She blinked rapidly but couldn't speak and took a sip of ale. She swallowed and then muttered, 'Ma was all I had. I'm devastated that she died so quickly.' She took a deep sobbing breath. 'I don't know what to do.'

His mouth twitched and he looked away, and then picked up his spoon and began to eat.

‘Well, this is what I’m proposing,’ he said, ignoring her tears. ‘I’m unmarried. I telled you already that I live further up ’river. I’m a farmer and I’m seeking a wife. I reckon that you’ll do well enough. What do you say?’

## CHAPTER FOUR

Harriet gazed at him without speaking. He wasn't exactly handsome; he was of average height and sturdily built with a straight back, a long nose and a firm bristly chin, and his hair was black, which she thought made him look foreign. He wasn't smiling, but had an intent expression in his dark eyes. Looks don't matter when choosing a mate, she thought. Kindness and generosity of spirit were more important in her opinion, but he hadn't mentioned either of those things. It would seem to be a matter of requirement only.

'Why me?' she asked. 'You don't know me. I might be a scold or a harridan.'

'You might be, and I might be a rogue. We'd have to tek a chance on that.' But then he smiled as he looked back at her. 'But I don't think you are. I'd know. I'd be able to tell.'

'What would be 'advantage for me? I'd want to be married in church; mek it proper and binding.'

'Well, I don't hold wi' all that mumbo jumbo, but yes, I'd want it legal and binding, and as for 'advantage to you – you'd have a roof over your head and

food on 'table; you'd have to work on 'farm, feeding 'hens an' that, but nowt you couldn't cope wi'. You look strong enough. I wouldn't want a weakling. But more important . . .' His voice dropped. 'I'd want bairns – sons to carry on 'farm.'

'How long have you been looking for a wife?' she asked.

He looked away. 'For a bit. Not seen anybody else that took my eye.'

In spite of herself she was flattered. He wasn't the kind of man she was attracted to, but there were few men who would want a woman of twenty-three, even though she was fit and healthy.

'I'd have to think about it,' she murmured. 'It's a bolt out of 'blue. It's not every day somebody asks me to marry them.'

He shook his head. 'I need to know. What are your options, Harriet? Have you got a line o' suitors waiting? Have you got 'chance o' better work?' He leaned towards her and whispered softly, 'Have you got enough money to pay your rent for that hovel you're living in?'

She hadn't got any of those things, she reflected, her spirits plummeting. 'When do you need to know?'

'Tonight. I don't want to mek any more journeys to this town except for one to fetch you home. Mek arrangements for 'banns to be read, if you agree; it's got to be in your parish.'

'What will 'vicar think?' she murmured. 'I've onny just buried my mother!'

'I shouldn't think he'd care less. An' it's not his

business what you do. All he should be concerned wi' is that it's been done right an' proper.'

Harriet put her hand over her mouth. 'I've no clothes to wear for a wedding. Nothing to bring to a marriage.'

'What sort of excuse is that?' he asked. 'If you marry me I'll be responsible for providing for you.'

She gazed at him. What a relief that would be, she thought. No more worrying about where the next crust was coming from. She looked down at the apple pie. The sauce was beginning to cool and form a skin.

'If you agree, I'll give you some money to buy a decent frock or skirt or whatever you need.'

'You'd trust me wi' money? What if I spent it and then disappeared?'

'I'd not give you that much to mek it worthwhile; an' if you did I'd come an' find you.' He gave a lop-sided grin but somehow she didn't think he was joking. He didn't seem the humorous sort.

She looked nervously about her as if the room, the serving girl and the few customers could help her make a decision. Rain was pattering on the windows; it would be cold at home without a fire.

'All right,' she said impulsively. 'I will. I'll see 'vicar tomorrow. He can read 'first banns on Sunday.'

'Good.' He rose from the table and called to the landlord for the bill and Harriet looked at the apple pie again.

'Can I tek this home wi' me?' she asked. 'I can't eat it now. I'll bring 'dish back tomorrow.'

The landlord glanced at her dubiously and then

at Noah standing over him. 'Aye,' he said. 'All right, tek it. I'll put a paper bag over it.'

Harriet watched as Noah paid him and left a small tip. It wasn't generous; it was extra but wouldn't cover the price of a pie dish if she didn't return it.

Noah put his arm on her shoulder as he ushered her out. 'I'll set you home,' he said. 'I've left 'hoss at 'George.'

'There's no need,' she began, but he interrupted.

'There's every need,' he said. 'I need to keep you safe, don't I? You know what you have to do? Go an' see your vicar, give notice to 'landlord that you're leaving.' He glanced at her. 'Or are you in arrears?'

'Yes,' she said weakly. 'Three weeks. I'll have to pay him if I give notice.'

He sniffed. 'In that case don't bother telling him. Damned landlords, they mek plenty out o' folks. Just sell whatever stuff you've got.'

'I might bring one or two things,' she said.

'Aye, trinkets mebbe, nowt else. We don't need furniture.'

It began to rain heavily as they walked towards Blackfriargate and Harriet hoped that the alley wasn't flooded. She pulled her shawl over her head, trying at the same time not to drop the pie dish. I'll have that for my breakfast, she thought, before I go to 'church.

Noah was talking. 'So, I'll be back in just over three weeks. Mek 'date on 'Monday after 'third reading of banns. Tell him. Tell him that's 'date you want, in late afternoon. About four. It'll be getting dark by then an' I'll have finished 'jobs on 'farm.'

'I expect you have a busy life?' she offered. 'Allus summat to do.'

'Aye, that's right. This is your entry, isn't it?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Well done. Not everybody can find their way.' She opened her door and he followed her inside.

'I know my way about,' he said. 'Here, give us that.' He took the dish from her and put it on the table. 'Have you got a light?'

'Yes,' she said nervously, slightly afraid now that she was alone with him. She struck a match and lit the stub of candle, shorter now than it had been when he came last time. She'd tried to be sparing with it, but it wouldn't last the night. 'I'm sorry there's no fire.'

He delved into his coat and brought out his pocket book. 'How much will you need for clothes?' he asked. 'And a bucket o' coal?'

'I don't know. I don't ever recall buying any. And coal?' She shrugged. 'I can manage without if I'm leaving in three weeks.'

'I'll give you five shillings. You'll have to pay 'parson for 'banns, I expect.'

'Will I?'

'He's got to live, hasn't he, though I expect he'll have a private income. Barter him down if you can. Buy yourself some food. Don't want you all skin and bone when I tek you home. And get a candle.'

She gave a wan smile; was he being kind or just practical?

He put five shillings on the table. 'That should be enough.'



Harriet closed her eyes. She'd never had so much money; she must surely be doing the right thing in agreeing to marry him. Then she gasped as he turned and put his arms about her waist.

'A little kiss to seal our commitment, hey?'

She held her face up to his; it was to be expected, she supposed. A pact, and he'd want to know she wasn't a prude.

He kissed her roughly, his stubble scratching her face, and then he lifted her chin and kissed her full on the mouth, his lips covering hers so that she could taste his ale and the meal they had shared.

'You're a fine-lookin' woman, Harriet. How is it that nobody's snatched you up afore? Not strait-laced and frigid, are you?'

'No.' She gave a nervous laugh. 'But neither am I wanton.'

He pulled her closer then swung her round so that she had her back to the wall. 'You can be wanton wi' me, now that we've agreed to marriage.' He pulled up her skirts and spoke softly in her ear. 'I saw a feller at 'George trying to put his hand up your skirt and you fended him off. Let them know that you weren't available to just anybody, didn't you?'

'Yes.' She tried to push him away. 'And – and I'd rather wait till—'

'No,' he said. 'We don't have to wait for 'marriage bed. Not now.'

She gasped as his hands roamed and squeezed her flesh – her buttocks, her belly, her breasts – and then he held her with one firm hand as he unbuttoned his breeches.

‘Please don’t,’ she pleaded. ‘I’d want it to be special on our wedding day.’

‘Poppycock,’ he muttered. ‘Anyway, I’m all fired up. I can’t stop now. Come on, let’s find out what’s in front of us.’

She almost screamed as he tore violently into her. It had been five years since she had been with Charlie, before he was lost at sea, and this man was nothing like him. He was rough and hasty, rigorous and unrelenting as he took her with no thought for her feelings or her pain.

He grunted as he finally pulled away from her. ‘Phew,’ he muttered. ‘I was ready for that.’

Like being hungry and then eating your fill, she thought bitterly as he buttoned himself up. Dear God, what have I done?

He took his leave then, saying he had to walk back to collect his horse from where he had left it at the George and Dragon, but she barely listened. All she was aware of was her own heart racing and the tremble in her legs.

‘I’ll see you in three weeks,’ he repeated. ‘Remember what you have to do? Be ready. I shan’t want to hang about.’ He paused for a minute, his hand on the door sneck. ‘We’ll need witnesses, won’t we?’

Harriet shook her head. She didn’t know.

‘Aw, we’ll pull somebody in from ’street,’ he said brusquely. ‘Give ’em a tanner for a drink, that should satisfy ’em.’ He looked closely at her. ‘I’ll come here to fetch you and we’ll go to church together. I’ll bring ’trap.’

She nodded. She seemed to have lost the ability to speak.

‘Cat got your tongue?’ He leaned towards her and lifted her skirt again, squeezing her buttocks. ‘You’ve got a fine behind, Harriet. Nice and rounded, better than I’d hoped for.’

He dropped his hand, opened the door and was gone out into the darkness and the pelting rain.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Harriet wept all night. She wept because of her stupidity, she wept for her mother, and she wept for the plight that she and all women like her were in.

Towards dawn she dropped into an uneasy sleep and was woken later by someone banging on her door. She rolled out of bed and was astonished to realize that she was still wearing her skirt and blouse from the previous day. She must have dropped on to the bed just as she was and curled up in her distress.

‘Who is it?’ she called.

‘Rent!’

She recognized the gruff voice of the landlord’s agent and scanned the room. The money left by Noah Tuke was still on the table. ‘Just a minute,’ she shouted. ‘I’m not dressed.’

She scooped up the money, bar sixpence, and put it in her skirt pocket, then ran her fingers through her tousled hair and went to the door.

‘All right for some folk,’ he commented. ‘Nowt to do but stop in bed all day.’

‘Tell you what. I’ll swap you,’ she said. ‘You can have my non-existent job o’ work and I’ll have yours,

collecting money from folks who have nowt.'

He opened up the rent book. 'It's not my money.' He raised his eyes. 'Have you got 'rent? You're in arrears, like everybody else.'

Harriet opened her palm. 'Sixpence,' she said. 'That's all I've got. Either you have it or 'butcher does for some stinking meat.'

He gave a deep sigh and took it and dropped it into his battered leather bag, then glanced up at her again. 'Where's your ma? She's generally here to mek excuses.'

Harriet bit her lip. 'Dead,' she muttered. 'Buried her last week.'

'Oh, sorry. Poor old lass. Pauper funeral, was it?'

Harriet hesitated; she couldn't lie over such a thing. She shook her head. 'Vicar found a place for her in 'churtyard wi' my sister, but he didn't charge, except for a penny to light a candle.'

He nodded sympathetically. 'She's happen better off where she is. Not much future for such as us, is there?'

Harriet felt even more dispirited at his dismal words, but she was surprised and grateful when he put his hand back in the bag and brought out a penny.

'It'll not be missed,' he said, handing it to her with a sly wink. 'I can easy lose a penny.'

'Thank you,' she said. 'I'll do my best for next week.'

'Aye,' he replied. 'Don't worry about it, I might not call. It's no skin off my nose.'

She closed the door and went back to sit on the

bed. He's right, she thought. There isn't any future. No work, no rent, no roof. So what do I do? Although Noah Tuke had left her smarting both physically and mentally, she realized that he had offered her a lifeline, an opportunity to climb out of the pit she was in.

I'll ask for 'banns to be read, she decided, even if I don't go through with 'marriage. I've every right to change my mind at 'last minute if I want to. But something told her that if she did default on her promise, then he'd come looking for her to demand his money back. And by then, she considered, it might well be spent.

As she jangled the money in her pocket, she thought that it would be nice to buy a new set of clothes. Well, not exactly new, she amended; there wouldn't be enough for brand new, but good second hand.

She ran through her options. Try for work once more, do the usual rounds of begging for employment in the inns and taverns for night time, and maybe, she thought, I could try for some other work during the day. I'll go to some of the other mills. I've plenty of experience and they'd be pleased to have me. But she knew she was fooling herself; there were others just like her, and they were all chasing the same jobs.

Or I marry him as I promised, in spite of his insufferable behaviour. What sort of man is he to act like that with a woman he's just met, even if he has asked her to marry him? Is he telling me the truth about himself? He obviously has some money,

or how could he afford to shell out for supper and ale and give me money to buy clothes and pay for 'banns to be read? But his coat and breeches were nothing special; mebbe he's been saving up for this, mebbe he just decided that 'time had come to look for a wife. He must need somebody to help him on his farm.

She hugged her arms around herself. It's freezing in here. I wonder what sort of farmhouse he lives in? She allowed herself the luxury of imagining a proper brick house in the middle of the country, with chickens at the door and their own cow for milk and a blazing fire in the kitchen grate. But how has he been managing until now? Who's cooked his dinner, and done his washing? He never mentioned a family. Has his ma died, just like mine?

But then, with a jolt, she thought of something else. He could have made her pregnant.

That decided her. She ate the remainder of the apple pie, washed, combed her hair and went out, dropping off the pie dish and then heading towards the church to ask the vicar about the banns.

She approached him nervously and told him in a quavering voice that she was going to be married. He frowned. 'Were you not here for a burial service last week?'

'I was, sir,' she said, 'and now I need 'marriage banns proclaiming or whatever it is has to be done.'

'Rather soon after your mother's death, isn't it?' His voice was disapproving. 'No time for grieving?'

'I'll grieve for 'rest o' my life sir,' she said. 'But I've been offered a chance and I'm going to tek it.' She

took in his grim expression. 'It's either marriage or 'workhouse. I've been put on short time at 'mill, I owe rent arrears and I've lost my job at 'alehouse. I could go on 'streets, I suppose,' she said resentfully, 'that's another option. Would it be better to sell my body to several men rather than just one? You tell me, sir. I'm sure you know best.'

He cleared his throat and looked away. 'I'll pray for you,' he murmured, 'and read the banns on Sunday.'

Harriet told him when they wanted the marriage ceremony, adding that as Noah was a farmer it was the only time he could manage; when the vicar asked for her future husband's name, age and place of residence, she told him as much as she knew. Not knowing how old he was, she made up Noah's date of birth, guessing at about twenty-five or -six.

She blew out her cheeks as she left the church, glad the ordeal was over, and as she crossed over to the Market Place she saw a woman she knew from the mill.

'Nancy!' she called. 'Aren't you at work?'

The woman came towards her. 'I've been put on short time, like you. I'm out looking for another job, though God knows how I'll manage wi' two bairns at home.'

'I'm getting married,' Harriet blurted out. 'I've had an offer.'

Nancy's mouth dropped open. 'You must be mad! You'll be in 'family way afore you can blink an eye. Don't,' she urged. 'At least you've onny yourself to



look out for.’ She heaved a sigh. ‘I was allus envious o’ you. Just you and your ma, no houseful o’ bairns wanting feeding and clothing or a man under your feet all day.’

‘Ma’s gone,’ Harriet felt tears gathering, ‘so there’s just me now, and it’s a lonely life, especially wi’ no money.’

‘Who is he?’ Nancy asked curiously. ‘From round here, is he?’

‘No.’ Harriet shook her head. ‘I barely know him. He’s from out o’ town – a farmer, he says. Lives further up ’estuary.’

‘Ah!’ Nancy appeared to reconsider. ‘Well, I dunno then. You’ll have food on ’table, I expect?’

Harriet nodded miserably. ‘Hope so. He’s given me some money to buy a skirt for ’wedding. Will you be a witness, Nancy?’ she asked impulsively. ‘He said we could pull somebody in from ’street, but I’d rather it was somebody I knew.’

Nancy licked her lips. ‘I’ve nowt to wear, except what I’ve got on now.’

‘Doesn’t matter. Will you come? If you’re not working, that is.’ She gave her the day and the time and Nancy said she would be there if she could, and then Harriet asked her to come with her now to help choose something suitable to wear.

‘Yeh,’ she said. ‘I’d like to do that, an’ I reckon if he’s given you money to buy summat for yourself, then he must be all right. There’s not many men’d give money to a woman to spend on herself and not on food or rent.’

‘Do you think so?’ Harriet asked, wanting reassurance.

‘I do!’ Nancy said emphatically. ‘I reckon you’ve done all right for yourself, Harriet. Wait till I tell ’other lasses when I see ’em. They’ll be that jealous.’

They toured the many second-hand clothes shops in the back streets, looking for something clean and serviceable. Harriet thought that if she was to live in the country she wouldn’t need anything frivolous, even though she sighed over a green satin skirt. Eventually they found a grey skirt with a circle of black velvet ribbon two inches above the hem, and priced at one shilling. Nancy declared it would be eminently serviceable, and suitable as a mourning garment too.

In another shop Harriet spotted a white cotton blouse and a short grey buttoned jacket and managed to beat the shopkeeper down to a shilling for the two.

‘My boots will have to do,’ she said, as they came out of the shop. ‘I’d rather spend a copper at ’bath house; that would be a treat, wouldn’t it?’

‘Oh, aye, it would,’ Nancy agreed. ‘I can’t help but think you’re doing ’right thing, Harriet.’

Harriet pushed to the back of her mind the fact that she wasn’t as sure as Nancy, but thought that she might as well enjoy the frivolity of a smart set of clothes and a hot bath before she took the final step towards marriage with an unknown man; and feeling generous she put her hand into her skirt pocket and brought out the penny the rent man had given her and handed it to Nancy.

‘Go an’ buy your bairns a penny loaf,’ she said.  
‘You’ve bucked me up no end.’

‘Oh, thanks, Harriet,’ Nancy said gratefully. ‘I’ll see you at ’church door then? In three weeks’ time.’