

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Rich Girl, Poor Girl

Val Wood

ABOUT THE BOOK

Christmas 1860

A waif from the slums and a poor little rich girl...

Polly, living in grinding poverty, loses her mother in childbirth and finds herself alone on the streets of Hull.

Rosalie, brought up in affluence and comfort on the other side of town, loses her own mother in similar circumstances and on the same day.

Polly takes a job as scullery maid in Rosalie's lonely house, and the two girls form an unlikely friendship. Travelling to the North Yorkshire Moors, they discover a new kind of life and find tragedy and joy in equal measure.

By the first winner of The Catherine Cookson Prize for Fiction.

CONTENTS

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty-One
Chapter Forty-Two
Chapter Forty-Three
Chapter Forty-Four

About the Author

Also by Val Wood

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RICH GIRL, POOR GIRL



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For Peter

'It's not the falling down that counts; it's the getting up
again.'

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Books for general reading

History of the Town and Port of Hull, James Joseph Sheehan, John Green, Beverley, 1866

The Glorious Grouse, Brian P Martin, David & Charles, London, 1990

The Victorian House, Judith Flanders, HarperCollins, London, 2003

CHAPTER ONE

In the last few days of the year 1860 there was thick ice in the Humber, and for the following two weeks navigation was hazardous. The conditions were unprecedented, the locals said, and all agreed that the whole year had been an extremely difficult one.

There had been many fires in the old town of Hull that year, but the worst had been in March when at two o'clock one morning a raging fire tore through a wine merchant's warehouse near the ancient Holy Trinity church, completely destroying the building. Casks burned and bottles of fine wine shattered, and alcoholic vapours shrouded the street.

In October the steamer *Arctic* was wrecked with the loss of six lives, and it was the general opinion that it would be a relief to see the end of the year. Surely things could not get much worse.

On the evening of 23 December it was snowing in the poorer part of Hull. The pristine flakes settled as grey sludge across the dismal courts and alleyways, adding an austere and shadowy gloom to the misery within the dilapidated buildings, which housed the malnourished, the sick and the despairing.

'Fetch Granny Walters,' Polly's mother groaned. 'And tell her to be quick.'

Sixteen-year-old Polly stared wide-eyed at her mother. 'You're nivver up 'spout, Ma? You said there'd be no more after 'last time.'

'Never mind what I said,' her mother gasped. 'How to stop 'em, that'd be a fine thing. Now go ... afore I bleed to

death.'

'That Sonny Blake or whoever it was'll kill you,' Polly shouted as she grabbed a worn shawl and headed for the door. 'They'll be 'death o' you.'

'Tell me summat I don't know, girl,' her mother muttered. She staggered towards a metal pail and retched and retched until her insides felt as if they were on fire, her throat was raw and her eyes were burning hot slits in her pinched and pale face.

Across on the other side of town it was also snowing. The feather-like flakes drifted down and landed so gently that they piled in soft layers, until it seemed that a flimsy white blanket had transformed the elegant houses into a mystical fantasy scene.

'Mama!' Rosalie gazed out of the second-floor window on to the street below. 'It's still snowing! Perhaps we'll have a white Christmas like the ones on the Christmas cards.'

'Yes. Perhaps we will.' Behind her daughter's back her mother grimaced in pain. 'Rosalie dear, ring for Martha and ask her to send for Mrs Dawson.'

Rosalie turned to her mother and took an open-mouthed, shallow breath. Mrs Dawson had been coming regularly to see her mother. Rosalie knew perfectly well why she came, but was not expected to comment on the reason, and did not.

She pulled the bell rope and with gentle concern asked her mother if she wouldn't like to sit down as she looked a little tired.

Her mother shook her head. 'I'd rather walk about,' she murmured. 'I feel rather restless.'

Oh, Rosalie thought in some trepidation. An early sign: restlessness with an urge to nest-build. Some weeks before, whilst searching for a book to while away a wet afternoon, she had found on the top shelf in her father's study a

volume packed with information which fully explained her mother's present indisposition. Rosalie's father was a military man and not due home for several months, so she had taken the book to her room and completed her education regarding the mysteries of the human body and the union of a man and a woman, which had hitherto been an enigma cloaked in secrecy.

When Martha knocked, Rosalie met her at the door and asked her to fetch Mrs Dawson straight away. Fifteen minutes later Mrs Dawson was directing Mrs Kingston to retire to her room and telling Rosalie to ask Martha to bring up extra sheets and blankets and boil a pan of water.

'Mama!' Rosalie whispered. 'Is it not too early? I mean - for a child to be delivered?'

Her mother gasped and clutched her chest. 'Rosalie! What would you know? How can you speak so?'

'I know that you are expecting a child, Mama,' Rosalie said. 'Of course I do. I'm sixteen.' She didn't add that she had worked out how long it had been since her father's last leave, and knew that it wasn't yet time to be delivered of a full-term infant. But of course she couldn't say so, not without giving away the knowledge she had acquired from the book, which she knew her mother would be horrified to hear she had read.

'Tittle-tattling servants,' her mother groaned as she was led up the stairs. 'There can be no secrets from them.'

Rosalie nodded as if in agreement. They would know, of course, but not a word had been breathed in her presence. The servants in this house were very discreet. 'I wish Father were here,' she said as she and Mrs Dawson helped her mother out of her dress before drawing her nightgown over her head.

Both her mother and the midwife drew in a breath of censure.

'Don't be ridiculous, Rosalie.' Her mother clutched the bed rail. 'He's the last person I would want right now. Now

please leave, there's a good girl. This is no place for you.'

In the sitting room, Rosalie looked out of the window again. The snow was falling steadily and she was barely able to see beyond the flakes in the dim and eerie gloom from the gas lamp outside the front door. There were a few people about, hurrying along the pavement with their heads down, the men with their coat collars turned up and the women shrugging down into their muffs and furs.

She sighed. It was going to be a long evening. According to the book she had read it could take until tomorrow morning or even the following night for her mother to deliver. But she was perturbed. Her father had returned to his regiment in the middle of July, and even taking into account that he had arrived home at the end of June ... She flushed. Really! She shouldn't be thinking of such things. But she also recalled that her mother had been ill only last year and Mrs Dawson had been sent for then as well.

Rosalie was an only child. She had had a brother, but he had succumbed to diphtheria and died at three years old some six years before. Had there been other pregnancies, she wondered. There was no way of telling. Her mother's constitution was delicate and the doctor often visited.

She went up to her room. A fire had been lit and the curtains drawn. The room was decorated in colours she had chosen herself: cream walls, pale green upholstery and rose-coloured cushions. She turned up the lamp and selected a book to read, but she couldn't settle and after a few minutes got up to open the door so that she could hear any sounds of activity from her mother's room along the landing. She picked up her book again and drew her chair nearer the fire, but presently the words began to blur and her eyes closed.

'Miss Rosalie! Miss Rosalie!' Martha was gently shaking her shoulder. 'Wake up, miss.'

'Oh!' Rosalie sat up with a start, rubbing her eyes. 'What time is it?'

'Half past nine,' Martha said. 'Mrs Dawson's sent for 'doctor, Miss Rosalie. Your mother miscarried. Do you know what that means, miss?'

'Yes,' Rosalie said. 'She's lost the baby.' She blinked up at the servant. 'Is she all right? Mother, I mean?'

'No, miss.' Martha looked anxious. 'That's why we've sent for 'doctor. Mrs Dawson can't stop 'bleeding.'

Polly had been sitting on the stairs outside their room when Mrs Walters came out. 'You'd better go in to your ma, Polly. She's right sick. I don't know what to do for 'best. We could do wi' doctor. He'd know.'

'Doctor! Where'd we get 'money for 'doctor?' Polly trembled. 'And it's snowing. He'd nivver come out on a night like this. Not to us.'

'He might.' The old woman lifted up her lamp as she looked at Polly. 'I'll send our Nellie's lad if you like. But you'll have to pay him a copper for going.'

Polly blew out a breath. 'Wait a bit. I'll talk to Ma. See what she thinks.'

The old woman shook her head. 'She's in no fit state to think about owt,' she said. 'You'll have to mek 'decision.'

Polly was scared. What if her ma died? Why hadn't she told her she was pregnant? Whose bairn was it? She'd suspected that Sonny Blake and her mother might have been lovers in the past, even though he was younger, but Ma had maintained he was just a good friend. This was his doing, Polly decided in her anguish. Rat bag! Lecherous cur!

'Ma!' she whispered as she went into the room. Her mother was lying under a thin blanket on the mattress in the corner. A stub of candle was burning in a saucer, but there was no other light. The putrid air stank of blood and vomit. She knelt on the floor beside her. 'Have you lost 'bairn?'

'Yes.' Her mother's voice was barely audible. 'Lost a lot o' blood.'

'Shall I run for 'doctor? Will he come, do you think?'

Her mother didn't answer, then began to weep. 'I'm bleeding, Polly. She can't stop it.'

'I'll run for Dr James. Mebbe he'll come.'

'No.' Her mother reached out and Polly took hold of her hand. 'Don't leave me, Poll. Ask ... Mrs Walters ...' Her voice was full of tears.

'Yes.' Polly scrambled to her feet. 'I'll ask her.' She ran out on to the landing. 'Fetch him,' she urged. 'Tell him to run. I'll pay him.'

'He'll want 'money first,' Mrs Walters told her.

Polly felt in her skirt pocket. Nothing. She dashed back into the room and ran her hand along the mantelshelf. A coin.

'A ha'penny,' she said to the old woman. 'I'll give him more when I've got it. Tell him to be quick.'

She went back in to her mother and knelt beside her again. 'I don't suppose he'll be long,' she said reassuringly. 'He'll have finished his supper. It's not that late, I don't think. I heard 'clock strike nine a bit ago. How're you feeling now? A bit weak? You rest, then. Shut your eyes and try to sleep.'

She was babbling, she knew, but she had to talk to stop herself from crying. 'I'm going to ban that Sonny Blake from 'house,' she said, only half joking. 'I'll tell him when I see him that he's not to come near.'

A breathy whisper came from the bed and Polly leaned closer. 'Not his,' she heard her mother say. 'I've not ... seen him in ...'

'Then who ...' Polly began, and then her eyes opened wide. How gullible I've been! Or have I not wanted to know that Ma might have been trying to earn money from — She daren't put the thought into words.

Her mother was still weeping. 'Dear God, forgive me ... my sins. I ... needed money, Polly. To buy bread ...'

As the boy reached the doctor's house the carriage was pulling away. He hammered on the door. 'Yes?' The housekeeper frowned down at the thinly clad caller. 'Stop that noise. What do you want?'

'Doctor. Can he come? Straight away? It's urgent.' He tossed a coin up in the air amongst the falling snow and caught it. 'Woman's had a miscarry or summat.'

'The doctor's out. That was his carriage. Give me 'address and I'll tell him when he gets back. But I can't promise; he's got others waiting for him.'

The address was off the High Street and she frowned. 'I don't know if he'll want to go down there at this time of night, not in this weather.'

'It's all right.' The boy wiped his nose on the back of his hand. 'Nobody much about. I'll wait if you like and show him.'

'Come back in an hour,' she told him. 'He should be home by then and we can ask him.'

'All right,' he said nonchalantly. 'See you in a bit.'

'Miss Kingston.' The doctor came out of the bedroom, clasping his hands. 'I'm afraid it isn't good news. No use beating about the bush. Your mother has aborted a pregnancy and is bleeding heavily. I can't staunch it and I'm sorry to say that I have done all I can.' He shook his head. 'I fear she has lost too much blood to sustain life.'

Rosalie heard him as if from afar and she put her hand on the wall to steady herself. 'What are you saying?' she breathed. 'She's not going to die?'

Dr James nodded gravely. 'I'm afraid she is. Sit with her to give her comfort,' he said. 'You are young, but not too young to give her solace. Then you must get in touch with

your father. He will be given compassionate leave, I'm sure. Unless he is abroad.'

I don't know where he is, was Rosalie's first thought, except that he's not here. He's never here! He's a soldier first and foremost. I've heard him say that so often. I daren't go in! What will I say to Mama? How can I comfort her when I'm so afraid?

'Mrs Dawson will sit with you, my dear,' the doctor said kindly. 'I'm so sorry to leave you, but I have many patients waiting for me tonight. I'll come again as soon as I can.'

Rosalie didn't answer but walked past him into the bedroom.

'Come, m'dear,' Mrs Dawson said from her mother's bedside. 'There's nothing to be afraid of. Just think of your mother going to another life.'

'I've to go back in an hour,' the boy said to his grandmother. 'I just missed him.'

'It'll be too late,' Mrs Walters muttered. She went into the room where Polly sat on the floor with her head bent to her knees. 'Doctor's been sent for, Polly,' she said softly. 'He'll be here as soon as he can. He'd just gone off on another case.'

'To somebody wi' money, I expect,' Polly muttered. She blinked and gazed at her mother, who was lying quite still. 'Well, he needn't bother,' she choked. 'We don't need him now.'

CHAPTER TWO

Polly paced the floor, weeping and shivering, unwilling to believe what had happened. Why hadn't her mother told her? They always shared everything. And why hadn't she noticed that her mother was pregnant? She was so thin, she thought, but then they ate so little, and if Ma was only a few weeks gone she wouldn't have been able to tell. She wondered who the father was. Had her mother really been with a man just so that they could eat?

She put an old shawl on the uncarpeted floor and lay down on it, putting her arms round her head, and as a thin sliver of dawn broke dimly through the uncurtained window she fell asleep. Mrs Walters woke her at nine o'clock.

'I've sent for 'doctor again,' she said. 'He'll have to issue a sustificate. Cause o' death 'n' that. It's what he has to do,' she added as Polly shuddered. 'And then I'll look after her.'

'But it's Christmas Eve,' Polly muttered. 'They won't bury her at Christmas.'

'No, they won't,' her neighbour agreed. 'But they might on Boxing Day or 'day after.'

'Where will I go?' Polly whispered. 'I can't stay here.'

The thought of staying any longer in the same room as her mother, who was lying there covered with a sheet, sickened her. She felt heavy with grief, and now that she could no longer blame Sonny Blake for killing her mother she felt impotent with rage and sorrow.

'Bless you, bairn, you can stay wi' us. There'll be no goose for Christmas dinner, onny a joint o' pork, but you're welcome to come 'n' share it.'

'I won't be hungry,' Polly muttered. 'I feel sick.'

‘Ah! That’s shock. You come back wi’ me and I’ll make a cup o’ hot sweet tea. That’ll do ‘trick. We’ll have it as soon as ‘doctor’s been and gone.’

But then what’ll I do, Polly thought. I have to live somewhere. I can’t afford ‘rent on my own. My wage won’t cover it. It had been a struggle to find enough money for food and rent even with two of them working, but now it would be impossible. The rent was due the following week, and after that she could only look forward to being given notice to quit.

Dr James came at midday. ‘I’m sorry I was unable to come last night,’ he told Polly. ‘But I doubt that I could have saved your mother. Mrs Walters did what she could.’

‘You’ll have been to somebody wi’ money,’ Polly blurted out. ‘They’d have come first!’

Dr James viewed her gravely. ‘As a matter of fact yes,’ he said softly. ‘But they happened to send for me first.’ He shook his head as Polly grunted. ‘But I wasn’t able to save that mother either. She had a daughter about your age who is grieving just as you are. There was a good deal of sickness and death in the town last night and Christmas will be an unhappy time for many people.’

Polly swallowed. She was awash with tears. ‘Sorry,’ she mumbled. ‘But I can onny feel sorrow for myself’

‘I realize that,’ Dr James said. ‘And I wish I could help you. But I can’t. Grief is not a sickness I can treat and there is no medication for it.’ He picked up his top hat. ‘I wish you good day, Polly. Be brave.’

Rosalie had sat by her mother’s side and held her hand and wondered how she could give comfort as the doctor had said when she needed it so badly herself. ‘Mama,’ she whispered. ‘Are you in pain?’

‘No.’ Her mother licked her dry lips. ‘Not now. I was, but it’s over now.’

‘The child?’ Rosalie asked. ‘Was it—’

‘There is no child,’ her mother breathed. ‘It was ... too soon. Rosalie!’ Her breathing was shallow and Rosalie had to bend her head to hear her. ‘Send ... for your father. You must send for your father. Tell him to come. Tell him I am very ill. Tell him - tell him ...’

What else she should tell her father Rosalie never knew, for her mother closed her eyes, took a last breath and was gone, as Mrs Dawson said, to another life.

Rosalie stared at the midwife, who rose from the chair and looked down at her patient.

‘She’s gone, my dear,’ she said in a sorrowing tone and placed her hand over Mrs Kingston’s eyes. ‘Gone to a better life.’

‘How do you know?’ Rosalie asked woodenly.

Mrs Dawson looked startled. ‘Well of course she has! What’s ‘point of this life on earth if there isn’t a better one waiting for us?’

‘I don’t know,’ Rosalie murmured. She was dry-eyed. The evening’s events had happened so swiftly that she hadn’t taken them in. She glanced at the clock. It was ten minutes after midnight. ‘It’s Christmas Eve,’ she said blankly. ‘People will be preparing for Christmas.’

‘Yes, well, there’ll be no tree or celebration for you this year, I’m afraid,’ Mrs Dawson said rather sharply.

The tree was in the yard at the back of the house, Rosalie thought. It had been delivered only yesterday. I could dress it in black and purple, I suppose, she thought, and light just one candle in the window. But maybe that wouldn’t be considered proper. And shall I have to wear black? I’m not a child, after all.

She was persuaded to go to bed. Martha brought her a cup of hot milk with a shot of brandy in it. ‘It’ll help you sleep, Miss Rosalie, and then tomorrow I’ll bring you breakfast upstairs. There’s no need to rise early.’

No, Rosalie thought, for what is there to get up for? No one here but me and no presents to put under the tree. Mama and I would have dressed it this evening if - if she hadn't ... It was then that she began to weep.

Martha brought her porridge, tea and toast at nine o'clock on Christmas Eve morning. She set the tray on the bedside table and opened the curtains. 'It's still snowing,' she said. 'Looks ever so pretty.' She turned to Rosalie. 'How do you feel this morning, miss?'

'I don't know,' Rosalie answered, taking a sip from her cup. 'Numb. As if everything is unreal. As if I'm trapped in a bubble and things are happening outside the bubble and I can't control them.'

Martha looked at her oddly. 'You'll still be in shock, Miss Rosalie. It's a lot for you to cope with, you being so young.'

Downstairs in the kitchen Martha confided in Cook. 'Don't know how she'll manage. She's acting a bit strange, but then you would, wouldn't you? One minute you've got a mother and 'next you haven't.'

Cook sat down on a chair by the table and wiped her brow with a white cloth. 'What bothers me is what'll happen next. I reckon her father will take her with him to his regiment and find somebody to look after her. Then in a couple o' years he'll marry her off.'

'But where's that leave us?' Martha said in consternation. 'He'll sell 'house, won't he?'

'Aye, mebbe he will, but that'll be for 'best, won't it, cos he'll give us a reference and we'll be able to stay on wi' new owners.'

Cook's got it all worked out, Martha thought, but I'm not so sure. I think I might look for another position and ask 'master for a reference as soon as he comes home.

Dr James came to see Rosalie and said he would issue a death certificate. 'I'm so very sorry,' he said. 'Your mother was advised against another pregnancy. She was not strong.'

After his visit, Rosalie spent the rest of the morning composing a letter to her father. She found it difficult to write and tore up several sheets of writing paper.

Dearest Papa, she wrote, and then changed it to *Dear Father*. It was distressing to put into words that her mother had died in childbirth. It was as if she didn't want to admit it, and if she wrote it down it would become reality. Yet I must, she thought, for how else will he know? Who else will tell him if I do not? She sat back and chewed on the end of her pen. What do I do next? Who will arrange the funeral? Who might I ask?

Her mother had a friend, Lucinda Fellowes, who lived in Anlaby on the outskirts of Hull. Rosalie liked her. She was a very friendly person, although Rosalie's father thought her rather vulgar. It was true she had bizarre taste in clothing and a loud laugh, but nevertheless she sprang to mind as being someone who might help. Martha had asked her that morning what the staff should do about wearing mourning, and Mrs Dawson had returned to rearrange her mother's room and decorate it with flowers ready for any visitors who might want to come and pay their respects.

Rosalie finished the letter to her father with an urgent plea for him to come home as soon as possible, and an expression of her regret that the funeral would have to be held in his absence. *I must be advised of what I should do regarding this*, she wrote, *and have decided to ask Mrs Fellowes as I know of no one else apart from your lawyer who might guide me*. She ended by apologizing for being the bearer of such devastating news and added that she felt bereft and very alone.

She sealed the letter and addressed it to her father's headquarters in Aldershot. Then she asked Martha to order her a cab, and returned to her room to change into a dark skirt and bodice and her best wool coat, which was a deep burgundy with a beaver collar. She went into her mother's room and tiptoed past the bed as if afraid of waking her to

open the wardrobe and choose one of her mother's hats. She decided on a grey felt with a black spotted veil and, glancing at the still form beneath the sheet, said tearfully, 'Sorry, Mama. I hope you don't mind.'

It was so cold that the cab driver was stamping his feet to keep warm as he waited for her and vapour was issuing from the horse's nostrils. She asked to be taken first to the post office, where she requested that the letter should be sent with all urgency.

'No post tomorrow, miss,' the counter clerk said. 'It won't get to the destination until after Boxing Day.'

She nodded and thanked him and thought that if her father was out of the country he might not receive the letter for weeks.

She settled back into the cab and asked the driver to take her to Mrs Fellowes' address in Anlaby.

'Do you want me to wait, miss?' he asked when they arrived. 'Weather's closing in and my missus likes me home early on Christmas Eve. I've to help hide 'presents from 'bairns. Not that there's many,' he added. 'Bin a bad year this year.'

'Do you have a Christmas tree?' she asked as she stepped out of the cab.

He gave a rueful grunt. 'Not us,' he said. 'No money for such nonsense.'

'If you'll wait for me and take me home, I'll give you a tree,' she said. 'I won't be wanting it.'

He expressed astonishment that she should be so generous.

'I've just lost my mother,' she told him. 'I'm in mourning.'

The cabby tipped his hat. 'Sorry, miss. I'll wait.'

Mrs Fellowes greeted her warmly. 'Well, my dear, how nice to see you. Have you brought news of your mother? She was in a fragile state when I last saw her but there will be a celebration soon, I do declare.'

'I'm afraid not, Mrs Fellowes,' Rosalie said, and then asked if she might sit down. She felt suddenly faint. 'I've brought bad news and have come to ask your advice. I don't know who else to ask.'

'Oh, dear. Of course, of course,' Mrs Fellowes fussed. 'Forgive me. Would you like a drop of brandy or sal volatile?'

'No, thank you. A glass of water.' She waited until Mrs Fellowes had rung the bell and then cleared her throat. 'Mrs Fellowes,' she said, 'my mother is dead. She had a miscarriage and died last night.'

Mrs Fellowes put one hand to her throat and with the other reached for the back of a chair. 'No,' she gasped. 'Surely not! I saw her only last week. She was a little unwell, as was to be expected, but oh dear! I cannot believe it.' She reached for the handbell again and rang it vigorously.

'Fetch brandy,' she told the startled maid who answered. 'And water. And ask Mr Fellowes to come immediately. This is a time when gentlemen have their uses,' she said to Rosalie. 'It just so happens that he is home today, since it is Christmas Eve. Oh, you poor child! We must write to inform your father, if you know where he is. Let us pray that he is in this country and has not gone gallivanting off to foreign fields.'

'I've just now posted a letter to his regimental headquarters and marked it urgent,' Rosalie said, and wondered if her hostess was going to be of any help to her. 'But I don't know what to do about the funeral.'

'Goodness, neither do I,' Mrs Fellowes exclaimed. She reached for her fan, flipped it open and fanned herself furiously. 'Mr Fellowes will know. It isn't something a lady would deal with, is it?'

'But I will have to, Mrs Fellowes,' Rosalie said. 'For who else will?'

‘The parson, my dear. I’m sure he’ll be able to advise you.’

Mr Fellowes arrived and Rosalie heaved a sigh of relief. He was as calm as his wife was flustered, and after expressing his condolences he suggested that he go with her to the vicarage to make the funeral arrangements.

‘I suppose that, erm ... the doctor and so on ...’ He was obviously trying not to upset her, and she told him that Mrs Dawson had everything in hand and would arrange for someone to sit with her mother, and that Dr James would issue a death certificate.

‘I will do all I can, Miss Kingston,’ he said gently. ‘This will be a very difficult time for you. Perhaps,’ he glanced at his wife who was still briskly fanning herself, ‘perhaps you’d care to stay with us over the Christmas holiday?’

‘Yes, indeed you must!’ Mrs Fellowes raised herself from her chair. ‘You must not stay alone. We shall be quite a jolly party. Our son and his wife and their three children, such dear little things though sometimes tiresomely noisy, will be with us, and my husband’s maiden aunt and her friend. You will be very welcome. Very welcome indeed.’

‘You are very kind to suggest it,’ Rosalie responded. ‘Thank you, but I think I had better be at home. There are letters to write and an announcement to prepare for the newspaper.’

‘We understand,’ Mr Fellowes replied before his wife could press her, ‘but please remember to send for us if need be. Now, I’ll just get my coat and hat. There’s a cab waiting, I notice. Is it for you?’

‘Yes,’ Rosalie said. ‘The driver agreed to take me home. Perhaps you would be kind enough to speak to the parson on my behalf? I don’t want to keep the cab waiting any longer than I must.’

The cabby stood patiently whilst Martha unlocked the yard gate so he could collect the Christmas tree. ‘We

could've put it up in 'hall,' she grumbled, 'or in 'kitchen. It'll be a dowly Christmas without a tree.'

'Thought that young miss said she'd just lost her ma?' the cabby said.

'So she has.'

'Well for shame then, you thinking of enjoying Christmas when she's in mourning.' He hoisted the tree on to his shoulder. 'My bairns'll be over 'moon. First time in their lives that they've had a tree. God bless 'young lady, that's what I say.'

CHAPTER THREE

'I'll get somebody to sit wi' your ma,' Mrs Walters said to Polly. 'It ain't decent to leave her alone.'

'Will it cost?' Polly asked. 'I've no money.'

'I'll see if I can get a whip-round wi' neighbours. She was a good sort was your ma, and folks'll be generous seeing as it's Christmas.'

'But who'll come to sit wi' a dead woman?' Polly wept. 'Especially at Christmas.'

'There'll be somebody so down on their luck that they'll be glad to earn a copper or two,' Mrs Walters said. 'Don't you worry.'

Polly went out after her neighbour had left, putting on her mother's shawl as well as her own. She couldn't stay in the room a minute longer. 'I'm sorry, Ma.' Hot tears ran down her cheeks as she glanced back. 'But I just can't bear it. It's not you under that sheet. You were allus singing and laughing, not lying so quiet and still.'

She snuffled into her shawl and went out into the court. The snow was wet and slushy underfoot, making walking precarious. She made her way down the High Street towards the seed mill. She should have been at work and knew that she would lose money by not being there. 'I'd best go and see 'foreman, she thought. He'll perhaps not dock my wages if I explain what's happened.'

But the foreman was abrupt. 'You should have sent word,' he said. 'It's nearly eleven o'clock. You've lost nearly five hours.' Then he appeared to relent. 'All right. Get started now and you can have half a day's wages. Boss says we can finish at six seeing as it's Christmas Eve.'

Very generous I'm sure, Polly sneered beneath her breath. Bet he's not here working. He'll be packing up 'Christmas presents in fancy paper, or inspecting 'goose.

She thought of Mrs Walters' invitation to Christmas dinner. They were a big loud family with not much money and she knew that she would be welcome to join them. Indeed, they probably wouldn't even notice her. I'll go, I think, even though I'd rather be on my own. I can't possibly eat and sleep in that room with Ma lying there.

She had had no breakfast and by one o'clock she was faint with hunger. 'Have you got a bit o' bread to spare, Angie?' she asked one of the other girls. 'I'm famished.'

Angie shook her head. 'Eaten mine already. I hope Ma's got summat on 'stove when I get home.'

A tear trickled down Polly's cheek. The foreman was hovering near, so Angie lowered her voice to a whisper. 'What's up, Poll?'

Polly shook her head. 'My ma died during 'night.'

'You poor bairn.' Angie sounded shocked. 'Want to come home wi' me?'

'Thanks,' Polly said, 'but no. Somebody's already offered me a place to stop. I'll go there.' She couldn't stop the tears or the choked voice, and Angie frowned in consternation.

'You shouldn't be here,' she said. 'You should have asked for time off.'

'And then how do I pay 'rent?' Polly said. 'I've onny my wages now that ... now that Ma's gone.'

Angie nodded, and then said, 'Cover for me, will you?' She glanced at the clock on the wall. 'Tell 'foreman I was caught short and've gone to 'privy.'

Polly nodded, and sighed. She'd have to get a grip on herself. No use crying and whining. Nobody could help her; she'd just have to help herself. But she was full of tears and sadness. Her eyes and lips felt swollen and her face was sore with weeping.

Ten minutes later Angie came back, and the foreman hadn't noticed her absence. 'Here,' she whispered, pressing her hand into Polly's. It was full of coins. 'One and a tanner,' she said. 'Nearly everybody's tipped in a copper, whatever they could afford. I'll ask 'foreman at 'dinner break if he'll dib in.'

Polly began to cry again. 'Thank you,' she sobbed. 'I'm so grateful. I can't tell you how much.'

Although it was very cold, Polly sat outside at dinner time so that she couldn't see the other girls eating their food; one or two of them came across to her and said how sorry they were about her mother, and one of them gave her half an apple. Angie came back to her with sixpence. 'Foreman give it,' she said. 'He's not a bad sort if you treat him right.'

It was quite unexpected and far more than Polly could have hoped for. I'll give it to Mrs Walters, she thought. It'll go towards tomorrow's dinner. She counted up the money and separated the sixpence. I'll buy some bread and a bit o' cheese for tonight, and 'rest can go towards 'rent. It'll buy me time to look for somewhere cheaper. I just hope Ma wasn't in arrears.

She thanked the foreman at the end of the day and he said gruffly that she should come to see him after the Christmas holiday and he would see about offering her extra work. Polly was grateful, but she did wonder how she could fit in any extra hours, unless she did a night shift.

'I'll have to tek time off for 'funeral,' she said. 'So if I don't turn up one day you'll know why,' she added, mindful that he'd previously said she should have sent word of her absence.

She walked slowly home, reluctant to return to the house. She was halfway down High Street when ahead of her she saw a familiar figure: tall, dark and with a recognizable confident posture. Suddenly she was full of anger where before she had been completely overcome by misery, and she began to run towards him.

‘Sonny!’ she shouted. ‘Sonny Blake!’

He turned round. Recognizing her, he lifted his arm to greet her. ‘How do, Polly.’

Unprepared, he was nearly knocked over as she launched herself at him, hammering her fists against his chest. ‘You – you murderer,’ she yelled. ‘You and all men. Vile murderers.’

‘Hey, hey!’ He grabbed her wrists. ‘Polly! Who have I murdered? Did I do it in my sleep? Cos I don’t recall murdering anybody recently. Ow!’ He jumped back as she kicked out at his shins. ‘What’s got into you?’

Polly sobbed. ‘Don’t reckon on that you don’t know.’ She lashed out again with her boot. ‘Lecher!’

‘I’ve had enough of this,’ Sonny snapped. ‘Are you going to tell me what I’ve done or do I drag you home and complain to your ma?’

Polly began to wail. She snatched her hands away and covered her face. ‘She’s dead! Ma’s dead.’

Sonny took a step back, his face draining of colour. ‘What? How?’ He shook his head in disbelief. ‘No. No, she can’t be. Not Ida. Not Ida! What happened?’

Polly swallowed and wiped her nose on her shawl. ‘She had a miscarriage. I blamed you but she said it wasn’t yours.’

He stared at her. ‘It wasn’t mine! Why did you think — I didn’t know she was ... I’ve not seen her in months. I’ve been away. I’ve been meaning to visit since I got back, but, well, you know how it is.’

‘Yeh,’ Polly snuffled. ‘Other fish to fry, I expect.’

‘In a manner of speaking, yes. I’ve been fishing. For cod,’ he added as she cast him a look of disbelief. ‘I had the chance of a job on a trawler so I took it.’

‘Hard work for a change, was it?’

‘Look, Poll,’ he said softly. ‘I’m really sorry about Ida, and I know how bad you must feel, but don’t take your anger

out on me. I'll do what I can to help if you'll let me. When did it happen?'

'Last night.'

'Last night! Oh,' he exhaled. His eyes flickered. 'It's Christmas. Where is she?'

'At home. I'm just going there now. But I daren't stop,' Polly choked. 'I'm that frightened. Mrs Walters said she'd try to get somebody to sit wi' her. And she said she'd mek 'arrangements for burial.'

Sonny pondered. 'I'll come and sit with you tonight,' he said quietly. 'I can't tomorrow as I've made other plans. But tonight, Polly, it's Christmas Eve. You should be there.'

'I know.' She wiped her eyes. 'That's why I feel so bad. I know I should be with her. She'd have been there for me.'

'All right. You go home now and I'll be along in half an hour. Trust me, Polly.' He gazed down at her. 'I'll be there.'

Her mouth trembled. 'Thanks. I'm - s-sorry that I blamed you, Sonny.'

He gave a ghost of a smile. 'You just needed somebody to blame and I happened to come along?'

'Yeh, that's right.' She made a brave attempt to smile back. 'I feel better now. I was full o' guilt at being so scared.' Tears rolled down her cheeks again. 'How could I be scared of my own ma?'

He gently patted her cheek. 'Shan't be long.'

Mrs Walters was sitting on the doorstep waiting for her. She had her shawl over her head and was chewing on an empty clay pipe. 'Guessed you'd gone to work,' she said. She screwed up her wrinkled face. 'Can't get anybody for tonight, Polly. Folks are a bit superstitious about spending 'night wi' - you know - on Christmas Eve. Tomorrow night'll be all right and Boxing Day night, and then I've booked 'burial for 'day after. Is that all right?' she added anxiously.

'I'm very grateful,' Polly said. 'And somebody said they'll sit wi' me tonight, so ... so she won't be by herself.'

'Good.' Mrs Walters eased up off the step. 'So we'll see you tomorrow for Christmas dinner?'

Polly nodded. 'Yes. Thanks.' Impulsively she gave the old woman a kiss on her wrinkled cheek. 'Thank you.'

She took her place on the doorstep to wait for Sonny, but after ten minutes got up and went inside and slowly climbed the stairs to their room. She pushed the door open and stood looking. There was a calmness in the room which hadn't been there earlier. She stepped inside and went towards the mattress in the corner.

'I miss you, Ma,' she whispered. 'I never said afore what I felt and it's too late now. If I'd known that you'd be gone so soon I would have told you what you meant to me. We had such laughs, didn't we, you and me? It was good wi' just 'two of us and no man to tell us what to do. You never told me about my da or who he was, and I was never bothered about knowing. I had you and that was what was important.'

She knelt down and took a breath and lifted the sheet to see her mother's face. She gave a little smile. 'You look beautiful, Ma.' Her eyes were awash. 'Really beautiful.'

She heard footsteps on the stairs and turned to see Sonny at the door. 'I was just telling Ma,' she whispered, 'I was just saying to her how beautiful she looks.'

He knelt down beside her and put his arm round her waist and she leaned her head against his chest as she wept. 'You're quite right, Polly,' he said in a choked voice. 'She does. More lovely than I've ever seen her.' Gently he put the sheet back over Ida's face. 'Let her rest now.' He swallowed hard and led Polly away. 'Look,' he said. 'I've brought us a treat.' He picked up a paper bag that he'd left by the door. 'Where can we sit? Here by the window?'

Polly nodded without speaking and pulled two wooden chairs towards the window. Sonny opened the bag. 'Got any plates?'