

VAL WOOD

The Innkeeper's Daughter

Struck by tragedy, all hope lost . . .
can she ever find her dreams again?



ABOUT THE BOOK

Holderness, 1847.

For reliable, thirteen-year-old Bella, life isn't turning out quite as she'd hoped. She lives at the Woodman Inn - an ancient hostelry run by her family in the Yorkshire countryside - surrounded by two older brothers who never pull their weight and a flighty younger sister. When Bella learns not only that her father is seriously ill, but that her mother is expecting a fifth child, her dreams of leaving home to become a schoolteacher are quickly dashed.

Times are hard, and when their father dies Bella also has to take on the role of mother to her baby brother. Her days are brightened by the occasional visit from Jamie Lucan - the eighteen-year-old son of a wealthy landowner in a neighbouring coastal village. Also grieving the loss of a parent, Jamie has more in common with Bella than she thinks.

When her mother announces out of the blue that she wants to move the family to Hull, Bella is forced to leave the only home she has ever known. They arrive to find that the public house they are now committed to buying is run-down and dilapidated. Could things get any worse? Or could this move turn out to be a blessing in disguise for Bella?

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THE
INNKEEPER'S
DAUGHTER

Val Wood

For my family, with love, and for Peter

CHAPTER ONE

Holderness, 1847

'HOW WILL YOU manage, Sarah, when I'm gone?'

'Don't know how. But I'll have to, won't I? There's nowt else for it.'

Joseph Thorp looked down at his wife. She was such a little thing, he thought, grown smaller over the years since they'd been wed. Having had four bairns must have shrunk her. She had been twenty-five to his thirty when they had wed in the spring of 1832, so she was now well over her middle years at forty. They had married in a rush and Joe, named after him, was born yelling and screeching a few months later.

Then just over a year later came fair-haired William, named after his father's uncle, and thirteen months on Bella arrived with hair the colour of coal just like her father's, and not named after anybody, but only because Sarah said she liked the name. Two years later she gave birth to Nell, named after Sarah's mother, Eleanor.

She had miscarried two more children and then there were no more, which was as well, he thought now, for it will be hard for the lass bringing up the bairns on her own.

'Will I be able to keep 'hostelry, do you think?' Sarah asked him, not looking at him but keeping her head lowered. 'Joe and William are old enough to help me, and so is Bella.'

She was always practical, he thought. He knew she would keep her misery to herself; she wouldn't want sympathy from anybody. He wanted to ask if she'd miss

him, but he also knew that a wrong word might open the floodgates.

He hadn't felt well for some months. Breathless when rolling a barrel of ale; a sharp pain when coming up the cellar steps. When he had keeled over as he helped the drayman unload the barrels from the waggon and heave them down into the cellar, Sarah had asked the doctor to call. A weak heart, the physician had said. Six months is the best I can offer you, maybe a year if you take it easy. Joseph didn't know the meaning of the word. He was used to working hard. He'd been a coal miner when he was a lad, working at the pits in West Yorkshire like his father and grandfather before him. He had gone on a day's outing to the seaside at Bridlington and met Sarah, also on a day trip from her factory work in Hull.

Joseph's uncle William was an innkeeper, and it was he who had suggested that Joseph should apply for the tenancy of the Woodman Inn in a village east of Hull where the previous tenant, a friend of his, had just died.

'I'll give you some tips,' he'd told Joseph. 'It's a better life than working underground and I should know cos I've tried both. Apply for the tenancy, tell them you've some experience, and if you get it, then I'll show you what to do.'

They were in a hurry to be married and so he did. He'd dressed in his only suit and plastered down his black hair, and because he was familiar with the names of some of the ales and beer he came over as well informed. He was a big man and looked impressive, and the brewery agent guessed quite rightly that he wouldn't have any trouble with his customers.

Sarah was delighted. She didn't want to live in West Yorkshire. She wanted to stay close to the places she knew, and she thought the wife of an innkeeper had a better handle to it than the wife of a coal miner. And there would be less washing to do.

Joseph had put on weight over the years, drinking plenty, though rarely drunk, and eating well, for Sarah was a good cook. Reckon that's what's done it, he thought, but then, without good food and drink in your belly, what's 'point of life.

'We'll not tell 'bairns yet,' she said as they stood contemplating in the kitchen at the rear of the inn. 'We'll just say that you've to ease up. Joe will have to pull his weight a bit more than he does.'

'Aye, he will,' Joseph agreed. 'He knows what to do, but getting him to do it is a different matter.'

Joseph worried over his eldest son. He was not as affable or as genial as he might be, essential if he was to be an innkeeper, but, Joseph thought, he's young and mebbe when he's a few more years on his back he'll see that there's a good living to be made here. William too would have to lend a hand, but whether the brothers would agree as to who would be the boss was another thing, and Joseph knew that the living might not keep them all, not once they were all grown.

Bella, he decided, would help her mother with the household chores and in the inn too when they were busy. It was high time she left school, in his opinion, but her teacher had made her a monitor and had asked her only a few weeks before if she would stay on and help with the younger children. Bella was thrilled and agreed even before asking her parents' permission, and had excitedly told them that she would like to be a teacher.

She'll have to give up that daft idea, Joseph decided. She'll be needed at home.

Bella swung her school bag, which had contained her dinner and was now full of books, and practically skipped home from school. 'I'm going to be a teacher,' she hummed. 'I'm going to be a teacher.' Miss Hawkins had told her that she was very pleased with the way she'd handled the

children and that when the summer holidays were over she would apply personally to the school governors, to ask if Bella could be considered as a teacher's help and expect a small salary.

'It won't be much,' she'd said. 'Barely pocket money, but if you shape up and study hard, by the time you're seventeen or eighteen you might be proficient enough to train to become a teacher.'

Bella could hardly contain her excitement. The world was waiting for her. If she trained as a teacher she could travel, become a governess; maybe she could learn another language and even go abroad. She loved her home, her village, her family and friends, but there was so much more, so much to do, so much to see, and seventeen was only four years away. In fact it probably wasn't enough time to prepare; she would have to read history, geography and literature, though probably not science. She didn't know any woman who read science, not even Miss Hawkins.

'Where've you been?' Sarah, her back to her daughter, swung the kettle over the fire in the black range. Her voice was sharp, abrupt.

'Nowhere,' Bella said. 'Coming home from school, that's all. I helped 'young uns with their coats - those who had a coat,' she added. 'And then I had to discuss summat with Miss Hawkins.'

Her mother grunted and Bella frowned.

'What's up, Ma? I'm not that late. I'll set 'table, shall I?'

Sarah nodded. 'There's pressed beef and some ham left. Start a fresh loaf.'

Bella glanced at her mother, who still had her back to her, but didn't comment. She put down her bag and went to wash her hands at the sink and then said, almost casually, 'Miss Hawkins said that—'

'Never mind what Miss Hawkins said,' Sarah interrupted. 'She's got no place here. Get a clean tablecloth out of 'drawer. I'll not have standards drop.'

'What's happened?' Bella asked. 'Is our Joe playing up?'

'I don't even know where he is. He should be cleaning out 'cellar, but he's not.'

'So.' Bella took a tablecloth out of the drawer and shook it so that it flew up like a white sail before settling on the kitchen table. 'If it's not Joe, then it must be Nell.'

She glanced out of the small square window and saw Nell out in the paddock with a friend, chasing the donkey. She heard their excited screaming and the donkey braying defiantly.

'What would be Nell?' her mother said irritably, turning round to face her. 'You're allus quick to blame her.'

Bella didn't answer. Her mother always took Nell's side. As the youngest she could do no wrong, not in her mother's or her father's eyes. But if it wasn't Joe or Nell who was the cause of her mother's tight-lipped manner, then who or what was it?

She sliced the whole loaf and placed it on the board, went into the larder and brought out the cold meat and the butter and put them on the table, then went back for a jar of chutney, her father's favourite.

'Where's Father?' she asked. 'Is he setting up for tonight?' It was Friday, always a busy night at the inn.

'No,' her mother muttered. 'He's gone for a lie-down.'

Bella stared at her, then, putting down the chutney jar, said again, 'What's up, Ma? That's not like him.' She had never in her life known her father to have a sleep during the day. 'Has he caught summat? Cold or—'

'He's not well,' Sarah said abruptly. 'Doctor says he has to rest.'

'Doctor! 'Doctor's been to see Father?' Bella was astonished. 'When? When did 'doctor come?'

Sarah sank wearily on to a wooden chair. 'This morning. Your father wasn't well yesterday and I sent for him. He came this morning. He said your father'd been overdoing

things, shifting barrels an' that, so he's to tek it easy for a bit.'

Bella considered. There was more to it than her mother was telling her, she was sure of it. Not only was Sarah's behaviour odd, she was also pale and tired-looking, and as she sat in the chair she fiddled with the corner of her apron, screwing it into a tight ball and then smoothing out the creases.

'But he's going to be all right, isn't he?' Bella asked, adding, 'Our Joe doesn't do enough. He could do more to help with 'cellar work and he could serve 'customers. Or else he should find a job and bring in some money and William can do 'bar work,' she went on. 'He might not be old enough to drink ale but he's old enough to serve it.'

But there again, she thought, William didn't want to be a publican, he'd said as much to her. He wanted to be a soldier. *Would* be a soldier, he'd told her, just as soon as he was old enough. She had been sworn to secrecy and told of the awful things that would happen to her if she informed their parents.

'You'll all have to do more,' her mother said. 'Including you. You'll have to look after 'house; cooking, cleaning, washing, all 'things I do, and I'll have to look after 'hostelry. I'll be 'innkeeper instead of your father.'

'Ma! It's serious, isn't it? Can't you tell me? Miss Hawkins told me I might be a teacher one day. If I've to give that up then it's onny fair that I know why.'

Her voice cracked as she spoke. Her hopes and dreams were about to be shattered and it seemed so unfair when she had two older brothers. William it was true had a passion to be a soldier, but Joe had no interest in doing anything as far as she could tell, or none that he had confided in her, at any rate. He seemed to be more concerned with chasing the local girls or larking around with his mates than doing an honest day's work, and she

couldn't understand why her father let him get away with it.

Her mother gazed at her as if deciding whether to reveal any more. She pressed her lips into a tight line and then spoke. 'If I tell you, then you mustn't say a word to anybody. Not even your father.'

Bella frowned. She thought this was about her father, so why should it be kept secret from him?

'It's true that your father's not well, and like 'doctor says, he has to rest. But crux of 'matter, Bella, is that I'm pregnant.'

CHAPTER TWO

PREGNANT, BELLA THOUGHT, and Ma hasn't told my father! Why hasn't she? Bella gazed out of her attic window across the paddock and over the hummocky plain of Holderness, her eyes following the winding road that led to the sea.

Holderness, east of the town of Hull, was a low-lying area, once a marshy land of lakes and meres which, though still prone to flooding after heavy rain, was now ditched and drained. The Woodman Inn, perched on higher ground on the edge of a village, overlooked this fertile arable farmland.

The tiny room in the attic was her own personal sanctuary, one she had chosen for herself when she had outgrown sharing with her brothers. Her sister had a larger room but it was off the one which Joe and William shared and likely to be invaded by them.

She had chosen the attic not only for the privacy it afforded but also for the well-loved view: a panorama which changed with the seasons, where the winter snow dazzled in its icy brightness, and the fresh growth of pale green shoots turned to a richer verdant hue as the weather became warmer, before becoming vibrant golden corn.

In early summer she could smell the meadow hay and helped with the haymaking, turning it with a wooden rake and, once it was dry, raking it into swathes before it was heaped into large stacks which, until she knew better, she used to climb up and slide down.

Once the corn was ready she watched the harvesters too and had seen changes even in her short lifetime. She loved

to see the line of scythe men, their shirtsleeves rolled up their sinewy arms to their elbows as they began their journey across the golden fields. With her window open she could hear the steady *swish swish* of the blades as the men, with their dying art, cut the corn, and see the village women, and children too who took time out of school to earn a copper, gather it up into sheaves.

Now, however, mechanical machinery was being increasingly used: the sail reapers pulled by two horses and driven by only one man were becoming a threat to the rural population, and to the families who welcomed the work not only for the men but their wives and children too.

Up here Bella could see the birds: flocks of starlings who flew in formation in their thousands across the wide sky; screeching herring gulls who blew in from the coast warning of bad weather; pigeons who ate the corn and owls who roosted in the ancient ash tree down at the bottom of their land and called to her at nightfall.

She turned from the window and sat on her narrow bed. She felt devastated after being told she couldn't stay on at school and yet didn't quite, didn't want to, believe it. She was shocked, too, at Sarah's news and could barely credit that her mother could be pregnant. Nell is eleven! And why hasn't Ma told Father that she's expecting a child? Does she think it will worry him when he's not well? But surely once he's better he'll have to know; it's not something that she can hide. And that, Bella surmised, must be the main reason why I can't stay on at school. Ma won't be able to work in the inn once she begins to show, and, she thought with increasing gloom, I'll have to help Annie with the washing and ironing as well as the cleaning.

Annie was a village woman who came in twice a week to help her mother with general housework; she filled the copper for the washing of sheets once a fortnight, and scrubbed the tiled floor of the long narrow entrance hall and the wide floorboards of the numerous rooms off it. The

inn was a square brick building but the inside meandered as if built without any intended plan, but on a whim of the original owner; some of the rooms led into others and then via a passageway looped back on themselves.

If Annie came in for one more day a week, Bella considered, then maybe I could study at home in between helping Ma. I think I might suggest it, but not yet. I've got all summer to persuade them to let me go back.

She heard her mother calling her to come down. They hadn't eaten yet and the food was still on the table. Her father had been asleep when she'd looked in to tell him that supper was ready and her mother had said to leave him for another half-hour.

When she went into the kitchen her father was sitting at the table drinking tea out of his own very large teacup. Bella was shocked at how pale he looked. He was usually so robust.

'Are you feeling better, Father?' she asked. 'Ma said you were poorly.'

'I'm all right,' he said. 'It's that fool of a doctor who said that I wasn't.'

William took a bite of bread. 'Why, what did he say was wrong wi' you?'

Joseph paused for only a second before saying, 'He didn't. He said I'd been overdoing it and had to rest for a bit. It was hauling on that barrel of ale that did it. I should have let 'drayman do it like he's paid to. I've pulled a muscle in my chest, I think.' He looked first at Joe, who was staring into space, and then at William. 'You two lads'll have to do more of the heavy work. Can't expect your ma to do it.'

They both looked at him and then at each other. William said nothing and went on eating but Joe broke out with an exclamation.

'I already work in 'cellar, Da! I'm forever down there; hardly ever see 'light o' day.'

'Then you'd best take a lamp wi' a longer wick next time you go down cos it's your job from now on. And,' his father went on, after a short gasping breath, 'I'm going to apprentice you both to a trade. You'll go to John Wilkins 'carpenter, and William to Harry 'blacksmith. I've already arranged it and you both start next week so don't even attempt to argue.'

'But you just said that we'd have to do more work at home,' Joe objected. 'We can't do both.'

'Yes, you can,' Joseph said. 'Get on wi' your tea and let me get on wi' mine. I'll tell you after what we're going to do.'

Bella glanced at her mother and raised her eyebrows, but her mother gave a shake of her head and she stayed silent. Only Nell, who assumed her father's plan had nothing to do with her, hummed a tuneless ditty in between mouthfuls of bread and beef.

'For goodness' sake, Nell,' Bella said at last. 'Will you stop that din? You're making my head ache.'

'It's not a din.' Nell pulled a virtuous expression. 'I'm practising.'

'For what?'

'To be a singer.' Nell buttered another piece of bread. 'I'm going on 'stage when I'm old enough.'

'Over my dead body,' her father said, and as he spoke his face creased and he closed his eyes, and their mother fell into a fit of coughing and hastily got up from the table.

Bella felt a cold shiver down her spine. She looked at her father and saw a shadow on his face: a shadow of grief.

He really is ill, she thought. What did the doctor say to him? It's serious, and that's why Ma hasn't told him about the child. She felt suddenly sick. Her mouth was dry, her hunger gone, and she pushed her plate away. She wanted to cry, to be a child again, like Nell; she wanted to be comforted and told that everything would be all right. But it wouldn't be; she was grown up or nearly, her childhood

gone at a stroke. At thirteen she must put away her dreams. She was an adult.

The chair legs squealed on the oilcloth as she pushed back her chair. She picked up her plate and took it to the sink where her mother was standing facing the small square window that looked out over the yard.

'Go and finish your supper, Ma,' Bella said quietly. 'Go on, and I'll make a fresh pot of tea.'

Her mother nodded but didn't answer and turned back to the table. She sat down facing Joseph. 'We could ask Fred Topham to give a hand wi' casks,' she said in a low voice. 'He'd be glad of 'extra cash.'

'Aye, and so we'll be,' Joseph muttered. 'No. Draymen can do it. It's their job to mek sure they're delivered and stacked.'

'Will we be paid, Father?' Joe asked. 'If we're to be working extra?'

His father appeared to consider, then said soberly, 'Well, your ma and me have been discussing that wi' your board and lodging going up, and wi' extra for washing and ironing your shirts, it'll work out that you owe us money, but if you put in a couple of hours more every day it should just about even out.'

Both youths stopped eating and gazed at their father, each wondering if he was joking and each deciding that he wasn't. William paused for only a second before giving a slight nod and continuing to eat, but Joe stared at his father and then cast a glance at his mother, who simply raised her eyebrows and returned his gaze.

'What about Nell?' Joe asked. 'Is she to do owt or is she just to swan about like she usually does?'

'Nell's onny a bairn,' his father replied, 'but she'll help Bella wi' some jobs after school. Your ma will be 'innkeeper for a bit until - until I'm able to get back on my feet. After that, well, we'll see how we get along.'

'But apprenticeship, Father?' William said. 'Why now? We should have started when we left school. We allus thought you wanted us to tek over from you at 'Woodman.'

'Aye, so I did.' Joseph took another breath. 'But things are changing and it's as well to have another trade at your fingertips. There's allus a need for a joiner or a blacksmith; there'll be plenty of work in that direction if 'beer trade falls off.'

William said nothing in reply and Bella, watching and listening, knew that he was thinking of his own plan and realizing that a working knowledge of the blacksmith's trade wouldn't go amiss.

'How long?' Bella asked her mother, as they stood alone in the kitchen that night after everyone else had retired upstairs. Bella had checked the bolts and locks on the doors and windows; her mother had raked the fire and set the table for breakfast. 'How long has Father got? I need to know, Ma,' she pleaded. 'To prepare myself.'

Her mother sat down abruptly. 'How is it possible?' she said in a low voice. 'How's it possible to be prepared for such a thing?' She gazed into the damped-down fire and spoke as if to herself. 'Your father and me have been married for sixteen years. I never wanted another man, though I had my chances. Now he's being snatched away.'

'Doctor might be mistaken,' Bella ventured. 'They don't know everything.'

'Six months, he said.' Sarah looked up at her daughter. 'A year at most. They can't do anything for a weak heart, everybody knows that.'

'If he rests,' Bella said. 'If we all pull together.'

Sarah gave a grimace. 'What sort of existence is that for a man like your father? To be an invalid, tied to an armchair for 'rest of his life?' She got up and absently rubbed her hands together. 'No. He'll forget what 'doctor said to him and carry on as usual - and then, and then ...'

'Will you tell him about 'bairn?' Bella asked.

Her mother shook her head. 'Not unless he notices.' She gave a slight smile. 'And he won't. Never has done afore, no reason why he should now. I'll tell him when I'm in labour.'

She turned her head away, and Bella realized that her mother didn't expect that situation to arise.

They were busy for the next few weeks. The weather was perfect for haymaking and the workers came in after a full day's work to slake their thirst and enjoy a slice of Sarah's ham and egg pie or fruitcake. Some of the casual day labourers, who were hired at especially busy times and were not local, couldn't always be accommodated on the farms and so stayed at the inn. The loft at the back of the building was fitted out as a dormitory and held six beds, though it was rarely completely full. It meant extra money for Sarah, but also extra work; although the room was basic she always fed the men well and provided clean fustian sheets and blankets. Some of them had been coming for years.

Joe and William would normally have been taken on as extra field hands, but instead they were thrust into the busy lives of carpenter's shop and blacksmith's forge. Joe rebelled, though didn't tell his father. He was essentially lazy and clumsy and received a sharp rebuke from his employer on his very first day, which made him irritable and antagonistic. William sweated in the blacksmith's forge but didn't complain, determined to listen, look and learn and turn the lessons to his advantage. Both of them, if they had anything to say or grumble about, chose to say it to Bella.

'It's for your own good,' she told Joe after an outburst. 'Father's only thinking of your future.'

'My future's here,' he snapped. 'I'll be 'innkeeper one day.'

She wanted to explain; explain that if the doctor's prognosis was correct, then he would be too young to be a

landlord, and if their mother wasn't allowed to hold the licence for the inn they would all have to leave.

William whispered to her that he couldn't believe his luck. 'I'll be one up when I join 'military. Harry 'blacksmith is a farrier as well as a smith. He'll teach me to shoe horses as well as meld iron. And I'll build up muscle, cos I've to strike wi' sledgehammer an' it's that heavy you wouldn't even be able to lift it, Bella.'

Bella looked at him and thought muscle would be an advantage to William, being so stick thin, unlike Joe who was broad and sturdy. She herself was plump and curvy and Nell looked as if she would be the same once she had grown out of childhood.

Their father, during his short enforced convalescence, had been filling his time with thinking and organizing, and as soon as he thought he was fit he made an appointment to see the local licensing magistrate.

'I've applied for a joint tenancy licence, Sarah,' he said on his return. 'I told Saunders that as you did half of 'work and saw to 'food and accommodation it was onny right that you should be named as landlord as well as me. He agreed and stamped 'licence there an' then.' He heaved a sigh of satisfaction. 'So that's one worry out of 'way. We'll get both our names put ower 'door this weekend.'

CHAPTER THREE

DURING THE SUMMER, Bella helped her mother with the housework, and in the evenings served the lodgers with their food and drink. There were three casual labourers staying with them during harvest. As the weeks drew on their skin grew steadily darker and their arms more sinewy and muscular. Sarah gave them an early breakfast in the taproom every day and then served Joe and William at the kitchen table before packing up bread and beef or cheese for their midday meal, or lowance as they called it. When the men had left for the fields and Joe and William for work, Bella dished up breakfast for her father, her mother, Nell and herself.

'Don't give me too much, Bella,' her mother said, but Bella, conscious that her mother was feeding two, put two rashers of bacon and an egg on her plate. Her father had two rashers, two sausages and two fried eggs whilst Bella and Nell each had a boiled egg, which they ate with bread and butter.

'Ducks have started laying again,' Bella remarked. 'I found three eggs under 'hedge yesterday.'

'Can you be sure they're fresh?' her mother asked. 'Ducks have a habit of hiding 'em.'

'They weren't there 'day before,' Bella told her. 'I'll try 'em. I love duck eggs.'

'If they're all right, you can mek me a Yorkshire pudding,' her father said. 'Shall we be having beef for dinner?'

Sarah nodded. 'We can do. I've got a nice piece of brisket. I was going to put it out for 'customers.'

'I'll just have a slice,' he said. 'An' extra Yorkshires.'

He smiled at Sarah, and she commented, 'I'm pleased you've got your appetite back, Joseph.'

'But you haven't,' he observed. 'You've hardly touched your bacon.'

'You have it,' she said, forking up a rasher and putting it on his plate. 'Bella allus gives me too much.'

He cut up the rasher and ate it. 'You'll have me as fat as yon pig.' Then he pushed his chair back. 'I'll go and set up in 'taproom.'

'I'll come and help you in a minute, Father,' Bella said. 'I'll just clear up 'breakfast things.'

'Me and Nell will do it,' her mother said hastily, and frowned at Nell as she began to object. 'You go and help your father, Bella. Don't go lifting owt,' she called after Joseph. 'You know what 'doctor said.'

'Damned doctors,' Joseph grumbled. 'They know nowt about owt.'

'Doctor's all right,' Bella said, following him out of the kitchen. 'It's for your own good, and it's only until your heart's rested. You're not to overdo things.'

'What do you know about it?' he grunted.

Bella hesitated. 'Onny what Ma's told me. She said that 'doctor says you've to rest.'

Joseph leaned on one of the wooden tables, breathing heavily. 'Aye, well, we'll all have to rest eventually until 'day 'trumpet sounds. I'm not ready to rest yet.'

'But we want you to, Father,' she said softly. 'We don't want you going to your final resting place just yet. So can you ease up a bit for our sakes, if not for your own?'

He pulled out a corner of a bench and sat down. He put his elbow on the table. 'Just what has your ma told you?'

Bella looked at him. His eyes were a greeny-blue, the same colour as hers. She shrugged. 'Not much.'

'You'll help your ma, won't you, if owt happens to me? You know, if - well, if I'm tekken afore my time?'

His voice was hoarse and she guessed that it had taken some effort to speak on the subject. She also thought that he was more worried than he claimed.

'Course I will,' she said. 'But you won't be if you slow down a bit; tek a rest in 'afternoon now and again.'

'That's what owd men do, Bella. Not men of my age.' He shook his head unbelievably. 'I just can't ...'

'We want you to be an old man, Father,' she said quietly. 'We want you to grow old.'

He laughed wryly. 'You've got an old head on your shoulders, Bella. I know you'll do what's right and expected of you.' He heaved a breath, and when he continued it was as if he was already planning what would happen once he had gone. 'Your ma will need you here. Our Joe will onny look out for himself, and William - well, he'd be all right, but he's got other fish to fry, I reckon. But Nell. She might give you trouble. She'll want to do things her way and it might not be 'right way.'

Bella fell silent. She couldn't envisage being responsible for Nell; surely that was her mother's role. And what about the new bairn, if it lived? Was she expected to be responsible for this child of whom her father was unaware?

'I don't think so,' she murmured. 'How can I be?'

Her father frowned. 'She'll look up to you,' he said. 'An older sister.'

'Wh-what?' Then she realized he was still talking about Nell. She shook her head. 'She doesn't listen to me, Father.'

'She will, though, as she gets older. She'll listen to you as well as your ma.'

'Don't let's talk about it, Father,' Bella implored. 'Please!'

She moved across to the bar, rummaged beneath it and brought out a duster and a tin of beeswax, then began to polish the counter, busying herself with the job in hand so

that she didn't have to think about the future; about her broken dreams or life without her father. He hadn't asked if she had plans of her own. He'd simply assumed that as the eldest daughter her place was at home.

She polished the wooden tables and dusted the chairs and benches, and took the boxes of dominoes out of the drawer and put them on the tables.

'Go on, Father,' she said. 'Go and talk to Ma. There's nowt for you to do at 'minute, not till later.'

When he had slowly got up and gone back to the kitchen, Bella sighed and placed clean towels on the shelf below the counter and set out tankards and glasses, the tankards for darker mild or bitter, the glasses for gin or pale ale. Then she stood gazing round the room. A shaft of sunlight streamed through a small window, alighting on a polished table and highlighting dancing dust motes, disturbed by her vigorous cleaning.

The room looked inviting and would look even more so later in the day when the newly laid fire was lit. Annie had polished the brassware when she was last here and the kettles and horse brasses gleamed.

When Joseph had first taken on the tenancy of the Woodman, the casks were stacked in the taproom and the ale drawn straight from the barrel. Five years before, at his own expense, he had taken a chance on fitting a hydraulic beer engine to draw up the beer from the cellar. Although it was not an entirely new invention and many public houses in the towns had them, it was expensive and the owner of the Woodman was unwilling to pay the price.

However, now that the casks had gone from what was still called the taproom, the extra space was filled with two extra tables and benches to take more customers, and the rich colour of the mahogany casing, the polished brass taps and the blue and white ceramic pump handles behind the counter were Joseph's pride and the envy of other local publicans.

Bella sighed again. It was home, well loved, all she had ever known, but she had longed for more; not to go away for ever, but to explore other towns, enjoy other opportunities, which education would have allowed her to do. If I'd been born a lad, she thought, I could have gone. I could have learned a trade just like my brothers. Father would have been pleased with that. But I'm not. I'm an innkeeper's daughter. I can do nothing but serve food and drink, and what kind of occupation is that!

The labourers, at their own request, ate their meals in the taproom, for they said they didn't want to intrude on the Thorps' family life. Bella served them their supper that night with pints of dark stout pulled by her father. When she had finished, he called her over to the counter.

'Come round here and I'll show you how to pull a pint with a good head on it. That's what 'locals like on their stout, a thick creamy head.'

He pulled another into a tankard, carefully drawing on the pump handle so that the liquid rose to a satisfying head. 'Have a taste to know what you're serving,' he said.

'Will I like it?' she asked, gingerly taking a sip. Then she shuddered. 'Oh, it's strong!'

He nodded and pulled on another handle, half filling a glass with darker ale. 'Try this,' he said. 'You might prefer it. This is porter, not as strong as stout and a bit sweeter.'

Bella took another sip, and then licked her lips. 'Mm. I like it better than stout, but I couldn't get a taste for it.'

'Some of 'older customers like it,' her father said, 'and 'younger men like bitter; that's 'most common one and has a stronger flavour of hops. Then there's mild, and that's a different flavour cos there's less hops in it. You'll soon get used to 'regulars and what their preferences are. They'll expect you to know and have a pint ready for 'em afore they get to 'counter.'

Bella stared at her father. 'But - am I old enough to serve them?'

Her father nodded. 'Aye, just about, but not old enough to drink, not on licensed premises anyway. Not till sixteen. But what anybody does in his own home is nowt to do wi' anybody else.'

'You don't allow Joe or William to drink beer even though they serve it,' she said. 'Is that because we're on licensed premises?'

'Aye,' he agreed. 'It is. Even though they live here, I wouldn't want to risk my licence by letting them drink alcohol. If they were out in the fields or in somebody else's house, then that's a different matter. But not here.' He tapped the side of his nose. 'So just remember that, Bella. No underage drinking in 'Woodman.'

'Yes, Father,' she said. 'I'll remember.'

Bella had cause to remember just a week before Joe's sixteenth birthday, when she found him behind the counter on a Sunday attempting to draw a glass of bitter.

'What are you doing?' she said.

'What does it look like?' he said, wiping his beery hands on his breeches.

'Who's it for?'

'Me.' He glanced at her with a defiant look in his eyes. 'You're not 'only one can draw a pint. I've done it often enough.'

'But you don't draw it right, you allus make a mess; and anyway you're not allowed to drink on licensed premises.'

'Who says? I'm nearly sixteen, so I can.'

'Father says not. He could lose his licence if 'magistrate found out. You might as well wait,' she urged. 'No use risking it. Father would be mad about it.'

Joe paused for a moment, and then sniffed disapprovingly. 'When I'm 'landlord you'll be out of a job,' he said tetchily. 'I'll not have you telling me what to do.'

'You might not be 'landlord,' she retaliated. 'We might all share 'tenancy, and anyway, Ma will be 'landlady if—'

She stopped, suddenly aware that Joe didn't know the full story of their father's illness.

'If what?' he asked sharply.

She shrugged. 'Just if anything should happen to Father; not that it's likely to,' she added quickly, fearful of making it happen by speaking of it. 'But Ma would be 'landlord then.'

Joe sneered. 'How can Ma be a landlord when she's a woman? She'd be 'landlady.'

'Innkeeper,' Bella argued. 'She'd be 'innkeeper, and then it doesn't matter whether it's a man or a woman. And she's licensed,' she added, pleased to score over him. 'Haven't you noticed 'plaque over 'doorway?'

Joe's mouth turned down, but he stood his ground. 'Well, anyway, I can still have a glass of bitter if I want to.'

'No, you can't.' Their father's voice came from the doorway and they both turned, startled; Bella wondered how much he had heard.

'You don't drink till you're sixteen,' Joseph continued, 'and then onny in moderation. There's nowt worse than a drunken landlord.'

Joe gave a foxy grin at Bella, as if his father had acknowledged that he would be landlord one day.

'It's onny that it's hot,' he complained. 'I've got a right thirst on me.'

'Then tek a sup o' water or tea; beer's for nourishment and pleasure, not onny for quenching your thirst.' Joseph came over to the counter and surveyed the floor where Joe's mishandling of the pump had spilt the ale. 'Nor is it for washing 'floor. Get that cleared up now, and if you can't draw it better than that, then keep away from it altogether.'

'It was our Bella's fault,' Joe complained. 'She came in and interrupted me.'

Bella opened her mouth to protest, but remembering that her father was supposed to keep calm and not have any upset she closed it again, and decided that she would

get even with her brother at some other time. She wasn't going to allow him to lord it over her, just because she was younger and a girl.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SUMMER WAS almost over; children were reluctantly preparing to go back to school, the casual workers were leaving, and Bella was kept busy stripping the vacated beds, washing sheets and towels and hanging them out in the paddock to sweeten before putting them away until the following year. She swept out the dormitory, washed the windows, and in the evening helped her father serve the customers. Joe and William were supposed to take it in turns to help, but more often than not they went missing when there was a job to be done. By now, Bella was becoming used to the regulars' particular preferences.

Johnson, a former plumber, whose arthritic hands were so deformed he could no longer hold a wrench, liked a certain tankard that he claimed as his own, even though Joseph told Bella that it belonged to the inn.

'Keep it by for him,' he advised. 'If somebody else gets it instead of him, he's grumpy and onny buys one pint. He'll buy two if he can have it in his favourite tankard.'

Mrs Green came in with her husband every Friday night; Bella knew them by sight, as she'd seen them in their cottage garden near the school. He had a pint of porter and she a neat gin in a straight glass. They always sat in the same seats near the fire and neither spoke. Bella had tried to talk to them but they never answered; it was as if they didn't hear her. But on leaving they always bade her good night.

A man in his thirties came in every Thursday at eight thirty, drank a pint of cider and left at a quarter to nine. He