JOSEPHINE COX

Lovers and Liars

HarperCollins*Publishers*

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2004
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Josephine Cox 2004

Josephine Cox asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 00 714608 6

Typeset in New Baskerville by
Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.

CHAPTER ONE

Potts End Farm, Salmesbury near Blackburn

IT WAS THE most glorious summer's day, but even as the sun warmed her face and the sound of birdsong thrilled her ears, Emily Ramsden's young heart trembled with fear as she hurried stealthily from the house.

He was in there. He must not suspect what she was up to, or her life would not be worth living.

Running across the yard, she was oblivious to the sharp mounds of dried mud and rough hoggin that sliced open the soles of her bare feet. She was desperate to get as far from the farmhouse as possible, away from prying eyes and into the upper reaches of the old hayloft. From there, she would know if anyone approached. He hasn't caught me yet, she thought defiantly. He won't catch me today, neither!

Something was about to happen, but as yet she didn't know what. All she had been told was, 'Be at the usual place, at the usual time, and there might be cause to celebrate.'

Excitement raced through her. She could hardly wait. In fact, she was far too early, so she had time enough to waste.

Overnight there had been a torrent of rain, still evident in the many puddles and flooded potholes along the way. Though the sun was already beginning to dry them up, there were still places where the squelchy earth pushed up and squeezed between her toes, creating long, thin sausages like

her mammy made. It was uncomfortable and messy, but it didn't matter. She would run down to the brook later, and wash her feet in the fresh, cool water.

With that in mind, she happily gathered the hem of her long skirt and splashed her way through.

Yet in the midst of her excitement the fear was never far away. *He* was never far away.

Nearing the barn, she felt a deep sense of relief. Soon, she would be safe.

Safe! She groaned inwardly. Not so long ago she'd felt safe all the time. But ever since *he* had arrived, their lives had changed for the worse – until it seemed she and her mammy and dear old grandad would never be safe again.

'I won't let him ruin everything!' the girl muttered to herself. 'Especially not today.' Her heart almost burst with pride at the thought of her lover. 'Today is *our* day . . . mine and John's.'

Yet even as she drew pleasure from the sights and sounds around her, she had no way of knowing that this day would prove to be the worst day of her life.

Emily Ramsden was such a pretty little thing. Small and slim, with thick plaits of sun-kissed brown hair and warm, smiling eyes the colour of nutmeg, she had a loving nature and a gentle heart.

At only sixteen years of age, a girl trembling on the brink of womanhood, she worked as hard on the family farm as did any of the hired labour, and through her generosity and honest demeanour, she had earned the respect and affection of men and women alike.

Yet there was one man in particular who yearned for more than a friendly word or an innocent smile. This was a man without compassion or decency. Just lately, his avaricious

eyes were following her every move, his cravings growing stronger every passing day.

Now, just as she reached the clearing in front of the barn, she heard the kitchen door being flung open. When his angry voice called out, her heart sank like a lead weight. How had he known? She had been as quiet as a mouse, and still he must have heard her leaving the house.

Quickly, before he could see her, she dodged behind the huge pile of newly-chopped logs, her heart beating so fast she was certain he must hear it. Whatever happened, he mustn't find her! These days, ever since he had rescued Potts End Farm financially, her Uncle Clem ruled their lives with an almost insane passion, and though it was against her nature, Emily had learned to hate him with that same passion.

'*Emily!*' his familiar voice boomed out. *'You'd best not be skiving again, or you'll feel the crack o' my belt across yer bare arse!'* In that same instant, Emily recognised the ominous whistle of his thin leather belt as it sliced through the air. She knew that sound as well as her own heartbeat, for all too often, she had felt the sting of his belt across the back of her legs.

Stealing into the barn, she softly closed the door and instantly felt more at ease in the twilight of that great dark place.

'YER BUGGER, WHERE ARE YER?' His voice shook with rage. 'WHAT THE DEVIL ARE YOU UP TO, YER LITTLE BITCH?'

Emily pressed herself against the cobwebby wall and, for what seemed an age, she hardly dared breathe. To comfort herself, she clutched the locket John had given her on her sixteenth birthday, and which she wore hidden beneath her pinafore. Within lay a lock of his hair. It was so romantic! She loved to feel that a part of him was so close to a part of her.

When, a moment later, the barn door inched open, she

thought she would die of fright. *He was coming into the barn and there was no other way out!*

She almost laughed aloud when her mammy's voice called out, 'Clem! Clem, get back to the house. There's somebody here to see you.'

Outside, in the yard, Clem Jackson swung round to face the older woman, who was hurrying towards him. 'What the devil d'yer want?'

Aggie Ramsden was a weathered version of Emily, but with blue eyes and a tiredness about her that told its own tale.

The likeness of her daughter was uncanny, for she had the same confident way of standing, the small, straight nose, full mouth, and that peculiar air of defiance in the face of hardship. Taller than Emily, she had a slight stoop at the shoulders, and though she was only in her thirty-fourth year, her long dark-brown hair was already streaked with grey. Tied tightly back, it made her look severe, when in fact she was a kindly soul at heart.

'Didn't you hear what I said?' she repeated. 'There's somebody to see you.'

'What?' His mind was still on the girl. 'Yon Emily's gone missing again, the little besom!'

'Oh, for God's sake, why don't you leave the lass alone?' Weariness marbled her voice.

'And why don't *you* bugger off.' There was the sound of that belt again, threatening, vicious – like himself. With the toe of his heavy work boot, he lashed out at the barn door, which slammed shut. 'What d'yer mean by fetching me from my work, woman!'

'Hmh! You should be glad I took the trouble,' Aggie retaliated. 'I've left my own work to come and find you. Besides, you wouldn't have been pleased if I'd sent him away without telling you.'

For what seemed an age, he regarded her through daggers of resentment. He recalled how his sister had once been a

real beauty, but that was a long time ago. 'I thought I told you to bugger off.'

'An' I told *you* . . . there's somebody as wants to see you.' Her voice was flat and uncaring. Her spirit seemed broken, when before it was bright and alive.

'Aye well, happen I don't want to see *them*, 'ave yer thought o' *that*?'

'I don't get paid to think. I'm just passing on a message, and I've got better things to do than run errands on your account.'

'You'd best watch your tongue, woman! Anyway, what are all these ''things'' yer 'ave to do? You're two o' the bloody same, you and your skiving daughter . . . allus trying to dodge whatever work comes along.'

'We both do our share and well you know it.'

'Not so's you'd bloody notice!'

He had a way of sneering that fired her anger like nothing else, but after six months of his tyrannical rule, she had learned to keep her anger under control, or suffer the consequences.

Yet now, when he belittled Emily's role in the running of this small farm, she had to put him right. 'My lass works hard and long on this place. She puts in as much time as anybody else and gets no thanks for it neither! As for me, I tend to the house and them as live in it, including yourself. On top of that, I do what I can when I'm needed outside. In face, me and my lass are *both* capable of turning our hands to anything. *And* we do. Which is more than I can say for some.'

His features hardened. 'An' what the devil is *that* supposed to mean?'

'It means whatever you want it to mean.' Pride and anger swelled her voice. 'Since we lost her daddy, me and my lass have worked as a team. And I don't mind saying . . . we're a damned good team at that!'

Laughing, he mimicked her words. 'Yer didn't ''lose'' her daddy. He just ran off, like the coward he was!'

Returning his probing stare she observed the red leathery face and small, milky-grey eyes. Clem Jackson was a bully of the worst kind, as big and evil as the bulls he had thought to breed here on the farm. Though he was her own brother, Aggie had never really liked her. In fact, he had never been like a brother to her, and never would be.

What was more, she wouldn't want it. All she wanted was for him to be gone from this place and leave them in peace.

'Michael Ramsden is no coward!' she said hotly.

'Well, o' course *you'd* say that, but you'd be wrong, 'cause he's a coward all right, he's yeller through and through.'

Drawing herself to her full height, Aggie momentarily lost her fear of him. 'Mark my words, Clem Jackson, Michael will be back, and when he is, you'll be gone from here like a cat with a scalded tail. What! You'll be sent down the road so fast you won't have time to look back!'

Leaning forward she dared to taunt him. 'I can tell you one thing an' all,' she said. 'I for one won't be sorry, and neither will the lass.'

'You'd best watch yer tongue,' he cautioned her, trembling with rage. 'You know what happened the last time yer 'ad the gall to stand up to me!'

She remembered all right, and her courage wavered. 'I just want you to know that my man is no coward.'

'Rubbish! What kinda husband and father runs off an' leaves his family to the wolves?'

'I already told you – he had a breakdown of sorts. We'd had a real hard winter,' she remembered it only too well. 'It came on suddenly and with such a fierceness there was little could be done in time. The sheep froze on the hillside before we could get them to shelter. And if that weren't enough to content with, the summer before had been a

drought. We suffered our worst ever crop when we could least afford it.'

Clem burst out. 'His old man had handed the farm to him on a plate – but that weren't good enough, were it? Oh no. He were a farmer, for Gawd's sake! He were allus carping on about what a hard life it were – so why didn't he either learn to take it in his stride, or give it up altogether? I'll tell yer why: it's 'cause he were too much of a coward to leave, an' too damned useless to stay.'

'You know that's not true.' His sister's anger faded beneath a measure of sadness. 'Like his dad afore him, he gave his life to the land. It's just that everything came at once . . . one bad thing after another. Like a nightmare, it was.'

She swallowed the emotion that threatened to overwhelm her. 'His poor mother was tekken by the consumption, and you know what happened after that.' At the time it had seemed as though the nightmare would never end. 'It were the last straw,' she recalled. 'It were *that* which pushed him over the edge.'

Clem stared at her downturned face and sorry eyes, and said without pity, 'Lost yer babby, too, didn't yer, eh?'

Seeing as how he was angling for a fight, his sister remained silent, but still he goaded her. 'Two weeks early and not enough strength to kick itself out, eh? Well, if it were *that* much of a weakling – just like it's father – happen it were best it didn't survive. I mean, what use a puny little thing like that? It would be no good at all on a farm, would it, eh? And when all's said an' done, the old woman were nowt but a nuisance. Huh! If yer ask me, yer were well shut o' the pair of 'em!'

When at his spiteful jibe she lifted her hand to strike him, he grabbed her fist, raised it high in the air and held it there, in an iron-tight grasp that had her wincing with pain.

'You're treading on dangerous ground, lady!' His jowls

trembled with rage. 'I can see I'll have to teach yer a lesson or two afore you know yer place in the scheme o' things!'

Suddenly, as was his unpredictable way, he was smiling again, his feigned sigh ending in a soft, cruel laugh. 'Oh, I know all about that lad as yer lost . . . ''born two week early an' hardly drew a single breath''. I know it all, word for bloody word! Christ! I've been told about it so many times by that daft old bugger inside, it's beginning to turn my guts over. I swear, if he tells me once more, I might wrap my hand round his scraggy old throat and squeeze the life out of him.'

'You'll not lay a hand on him!' Now she would not be silenced. 'Thomas Isaac is a sick old man. Touch him and you'll have me to deal with!'

Chuckling like a maniac, he entreated her, 'Just listen to yersel'.' He cackled. 'By! You'll 'ave me shivering in me shoes next.' He touched her on the shoulder, not surprised when she shrank from him. 'Oh, you'd rather be touched by that cowardly husband o' yourn, is that it?'

Without replying, she turned away, but he came after her, laughing and taunting, driving her crazy. 'Oh, I forgot! You don't like me calling him a coward, do yer, eh? But that's what he is, all right. A shameful bloody coward! He cleared off an' left yer to face it all on yer own. An' yet you still have feelings for him. Mind, if I were you, I'd be praying he never again sets foot on this land. Or if he did, I'd be waiting for him with a loaded shotgun an' no mistake.'

She shook her head. 'Well, thank God you're not me. The truth is, I pray every night for Michael to come home, and when he does, I'll be waiting for him with open arms.'

'Then yer a bigger fool than I took yer for!'

She merely shrugged her shoulders. 'Like I said, it was one thing after another. When his mammy was took ill, he was already battling with debt. Then what with the babby an' all . . . It was just too much. We'd waited all those years

for a brother or sister for our Emily.' Tears filled her eyes. 'Michael fell to pieces – as any man might have done in the same circumstances.'

'Not *me*!' he said boastfully. 'I'm not the kinda man to turn tail and run.'

'That's because life has never tried you hard enough.'

This time he grabbed her by the hair, making her cry out. 'What are you saying . . . bitch!'

She looked at him with a measure of pity that turned his insides over. 'Hurt me if you like, Clem, but I won't have it that my Michael is a coward.'

'Hmh! Then like I say, yer a bigger bloody fool than I took yer for.' Thrusting her aside, he sneered: 'All the same, it's as well I were on hand to help you out with a bob or two, or you'd have lost this place – and serve yer bloody well right!'

Having gone to him cap in hand was her greatest regret. 'If I could turn back the clock, I would never have come to you,' she informed him quietly.

'Well, yer did. An' it were me as paid off all the debts, an' never you forget that.' Spitting on the ground he reminded her, 'With the old fella too useless to put one foot afore the other, an' folks knocking at your door for their money or your blood, you were in a sorry mess. All yer need to remember is that your husband left *me* to pick up the pieces, and that's what I did. An' for that, yer should be grateful, you *and* that daughter o' yourn!'

At his words, Emily shivered behind the barn door.

Surveying the land about him, Clem grinned with satisfaction. 'I've saved all o' this, and now it's as good as mine! Matter o' fact, if I wanted, I could throw the three of youse out on the streets right now.' He took a step forward, his eyes glaring, his face contorted in triumph. 'I might even do that!' he threatened. 'Yes, happen I'd be better off getting rid of the bloody lot o' you. There's allus cheap labour about

to help me run this place.' He gave her a push. 'Go on. Get outta my sight!'

As she turned to leave, she thought it time to remind him of something he appeared to have forgotten. 'This farm isn't yours, and it never will be.'

'It might be . . . if I decide to call in what's owed me.'

'I already told you: somehow or another we'll pay you back. It's just a matter of time.'

'Aye well, time and tide waits for no man, an' I'll not wait for ever to collect my money.' Taking a long, laborious breath he finished, 'Until I get back what I've paid out, with profit, this farm is as good as mine – an' as far as I'm concerned, that meks me the master round 'ere.'

'Enjoy it then, while you can,' she retorted, 'because I mean to pay you back at the first opportunity, and I will, or my name's not Aggie Ramsden.'

'Give it up, woman. Yer a dreamer.' Though he didn't much care for the look in her eyes nor the determination in her voice. However, he had the upper hand at the moment and there was nothing she could do. He knew it and she knew it, however defiant she might pretend to be.

'You've not a brass farthing to yer name, none of yer! It's *my* money as keeps this place up and running. If I took a mind to move on, you'd sink without trace.' For good measure, he gave her a vicious dig in the ribs that made her gasp with surprise and pain. 'Like it or not, yer all dancing to my tune. It might serve yer well, to keep that in mind.'

She didn't argue. But she looked at him . . . *looked through him* . . . wishing with all her heart that it might have been different.

He could almost read her thoughts. 'You want me gone from 'ere so bad yer can taste it, can't yer?' he muttered curiously.

When she gave no answer, he took great pleasure in

informing her: 'Well, yer can want on, 'cause I'll not be going nowhere!' He smiled, a nasty little smile she had come to know only too well. 'I mean, a man would be mad to leave such a nice, cosy set-up, wouldn't he, eh?'

She looked at him for what seemed an age, during which his smile faded and a look of hardness fired his eyes. 'Got summat else to say, 'ave yer . . . *sister* dear?'

To his consternation, she continued to observe him, wondering how this man who seemed like a stranger to her, could ever have been her kith and kin. 'I'd best go.' She turned from him.

'Oh, aye, that's right!' his taunting voice followed her. 'You'd best hurry away to tend to them ''things'' you reckon are so pressing!'

His laughter grated on her, but she wasn't about to rise to any more of his taunts. Too often she had experienced his rage at firsthand, and she knew only to well what monstrous things he was capable of.

Then there was the other, shocking thing. He hadn't mentioned it yet, but he would. When it suited his purpose.

If only she could get rid of him once and for all, she wouldn't even hesitate. But there was no way that she could see. At least, not without her being hanged for it.

His voice shattered her thoughts. 'Who is it then?'

'What!' Startled, she looked up.

'Wake up, woman! Yer said there were somebody to see me. Who is it?'

'You'll know when you get there, won't you?'

With that she flounced off, leaving him cursing and grumbling as he stomped back to the farmhouse. 'Bloody women!' He spat on the ground in disgust. 'The lot of 'em want shooting.'

Through the crack in the barn-wall, Emily saw them leave; first her mammy, then him, that great bulk of a man, striding along as though he owned the place. 'Good riddance to you!' she muttered, though her face shone with love as she followed the homely figure of her dear mammy. Her heart ached. Given the chance, she would do anything to protect her.

When at last they were gone, the girl breathed a sigh of relief. So as to not trip over it, she gathered up the hem of her long skirt, and went at a run towards the ladder at the far end of the barn.

Unable to trust him, she frequently glanced back.

When Clem first arrived, after her daddy deserted them, she had tried hard to like him, for her mother's sake. But she couldn't. He was not the sort of man you could take to, and how he came to be her mother's brother she would never know, for Aggie was a kind, gentle soul – though she did have a fierce temper when put out.

Clambering up the ladder, Emily pulled herself into the hayloft and made for the far corner. Here, she reached up on tiptoe, her arm stretching into the roof, where the two great wooden rafters joined together. The small brown notebook clutched tightly to her chest, soon she was seated cross-legged in the hay, her eyes closed and her heart beating fast with excitement.

In her mind's eye she could see every word written there, all her secret thoughts: the sorrow she had suffered when her Granny Clare had sickened from consumption and died, nearly breaking her grandad's heart; the wrenching sobs she and her family had wept at the tragic loss of her darling baby brother. Some tears trickled down her rosy cheeks as she remembered little Michael, so pale and still, wrapped in her own baby shawl that couldn't warm him . . . Then her tears dried as bitter resentment took their place – hatred for the man who soon after had invaded their lives. She had

written about her love for her mammy, and her grandad, and prayed for her daddy, wherever he was.

In fact, all her life as it was, had been entered in the pages of that little book.

More recently she had confided of her growing love for John; of her hopes for the future, and even a little prayer that Clem would go away and everything would be all right again, just like it used to be.

After a while, she laid the notebook on her lap and gingerly eased it open. She needed to reread the last entry – to make sure she had not been dreaming.

Suddenly, a small, shuffling sound startled her. What was that!

With fear licking at her insides, she laid the book face down and shrank into the background. Was there somebody else here, she thought worriedly. Did someone come in just now?

A ray of early-morning sunshine crept in from the one window high up in the barn, and shone down on the page. A gentle wind blew against the old barn-walls, which creaked and groaned as if alive. And she heard the faint splash of a coal-barge wending its way along the nearby canal.

She glanced about, satisfying herself that there was no one there. 'You're beginning to imagine things,' she told herself, but then was it any wonder, if her nerves were on edge?

Pushing aside her two plaits, Emily roved her gaze over the previous day's entry and began to read it aloud.

CHAPTER TWO

INSIDE THE FARMHOUSE, Thomas Isaac Ramsden waited for his daughter-in-law. He heard her come through the back door, then a few minutes later he was relieved to see her enter the living room. 'Here you are then, Dad.' Aggie set the tray down on his lap. 'There's a nice cuppa tea in your favourite mug, and one of my raisin biscuits. You sit and enjoy that, while I go an' hang out the washing.'

While she spoke she smiled down on him, the love shining in her blue eyes. 'Later on, we'll go for a gentle walk if you like?' she offered. 'It's a beautiful day outside. The fresh air will do us both good.'

He nodded. 'I can't go far, lass,' he reminded her. 'Me old legs aren't what they used to be.' He carefully lifted his Coronation mug, which showed the new King, Edward VII, in his full-bearded glory, and took a grateful sup of the hot brew.

'It's all right, Dad,' Aggie said. 'We'll just go as far as the orchard and back.'

He nodded appreciatively. 'Happen once we're there we can sit awhile on the bench.' He took another long slurp of his tea.

'That'll be nice,' she agreed. 'Let's do that then, shall we?'

'Happen I can smoke me pipe?'

She smiled. 'You allus do. To tell you the truth, Dad, I'll be glad of a sit-down.' She gave a low sigh. 'Whatever we turn our hand to, me and Emily allus seem to be in a rush these days. There's too much work, and not enough time to get it all done.' Not so long ago, life had been so much easier, she thought. Her husband had still been here, and their new baby was growing in her womb. Potts End had been a joyful place then.

Lost in his own thoughts, Thomas merely nodded. 'Where *is* Emily?'

'Gone off by herself somewheres. You know what the lass is like – up at first light to do her chores, then away across the fields.'

'She'll be back though, won't she?' His eyes dimmed over. 'She *will* be back?'

'O' course she will. Whatever meks you say a thing like that?'

'Michael never came back, did he?' He paused, then: 'I miss him.'

'We all miss him, Dad.' Aggie's voice dropped to a whisper. 'But he'll be back.'

Cupping his ear, he asked worriedly, 'What's that you say, lass?'

She gave him her cheeriest smile. 'I said . . . *Michael will be back*. You'll see . . . some bright day, in the not too distant future, he'll walk through that door and we'll all be together again.'

On her words he looked up and smiled. It was a sad smile. Though he didn't want to dash her hopes, he believed there was little chance of his son ever coming home. His heart ached for Clare, and he lifted the mug to his lips again.

Aggie read his thoughts and a pang of loneliness stabbed her heart. 'Will you be all right if I go outside now?' she asked.

'O' course I will.' He looked surprised. 'I'm not in me second childhood yet, you know!'

She laughed at that. 'Don't I know it!' Humouring him, she wagged a finger. 'By! I've yet to see the day when anybody can get one over on you!'

The old man pointed to his halfeaten biscuit. 'I don't suppose there's another one o' them going, is there? Or mebbe even a couple?'

Prompted by an impulse of affection, she kissed the top of his head. 'Oh, I dare say there might be a couple more hiding in the larder.'

He gave her a little push. 'Go on then!' He grinned, a wide, uplifting grin that showed his surprisingly even teeth, of which he was very proud. 'A poor old man could starve afore he got any attention round 'ere.'

'Give over!' She feigned shock. 'You get more attention than anybody and well you know it, you old devil.'

'Mebbe. But it's another biscuit I'm wanting . . . that's if you've a mind to fetch me one?'

Straightening up, she sighed, 'If it's a biscuit you're wanting, then it's a biscuit you'll get.' With that she marched off, only to pause at the door and look back on him.

Her heart was full to overflowing as she took stock of that dear old man, his head bent as he lost himself in private thoughts of days gone by. She and her father-in-law had a special kind of relationship, and she was grateful to have him in her life.

Thomas Isaac had no idea she was taking stock of him. He was thinking of his home and his life, and his heart was warmed. Once a big strong farmhand, he had worked his way up, and put money by, until one proud day, he could buy his own little farm. Potts End wasn't big by anyone else's standards, but it had been his, lock, stock and barrel, until he had signed it over to Michael and Aggie, and he had good reason to be proud of his achievement. Nowadays, he

was too old and tired to pick up a spade, but there were other consolations in life, such as the smell of dew on the morning air, the special excitements of haymaking and harvest, and the sun coming up over the hills. And most of all, the sight of Emily running towards the cottage after one of her long ramblings. Although he missed his wife Clare, a bonny lass until the consumption took her, he thanked God he had these two wonderful women in his life, Aggie and Emily, for they meant the whole world to him.

He thought back on his youth and smiled inwardly. He'd been a bit of a lad in his day, but had few regrets – except o' course, it would be good to roll up his sleeves and bend his back to his work, but it wasn't to be.

From the doorway, Aggie's thoughts were much the same. She had known Thomas Isaac as a big strong man, and had seen his body become frail and slow. But though his strength was broken, his spirit was not. He still had an eye for the women and a sprightly story to tell. He had a good head of iron-grey hair, and the pale eyes carried a sparkle that could light up a room when he turned on the charm.

Lately though, since all their trials and tribulations, the sparkle had grown dim.

Like her daughter, Aggie cherished the ground the old fella walked on.

'Are you still there?' Looking up, he caught her observing him. 'I'm still waiting on that biscuit.'

'Coming right up, Dad,' she promised, and hurried away.

Behind her the old man leaned back in his chair and shook his head. 'You've a lot to answer for, son,' he murmured. 'When you took off, you left a pack o' trouble for these lovely lasses, and no mistake!'

Through the scullery window Aggie saw her brother, Clem, and her heart sank. He was emerging from the outhouse, his huge black dog, Badger, skulking at his side; there was a look of murder on his face, and a shotgun slung

over his shoulder. God Almighty, what was he up to now?

She went into the larder and, taking half a dozen biscuits from the tin, she placed them on a saucer and carried them in to the old man. 'If you want any more, just give me a shout,' she told him.

Instead of acknowledging the biscuits, Thomas jolted her by declaring in a worried voice, 'There's bound to be trouble, mark my words.'

She stooped to answer, her voice low but clear. 'Why should there be trouble?'

He pointed to the window, where the young man could be seen pacing back and forth. 'That's young John Hanley, ain't it?'

Following his gaze, she too saw John pacing back and forth, growing increasingly agitated. 'He's waiting to speak with Clem,' she informed the old fella. 'I've just been to fetch him.'

'What does the lad want wi' that surly bugger?'

She too had been a little curious when John turned up at the doorstep earlier. 'He wouldn't say,' she shrugged. 'Happen he's after more work. He's already finished that job our Michael started him on.' She gave a cheeky wink. 'He's done a grand job an' all. After eight months o' breaking his back, he's made both them wagons as good as new . . . they're completely rebuilt from the bottom up, so they are. The hay-trailer is stronger than ever, the ladders are safe to climb since he replaced all the rotting rungs, and he's repaired so much o' the fencing.' She paused, before going on quietly, 'All the jobs Michael would have done, if only he'd been himself.'

'Well, young John seems to know what he's doing.' The old fella's feelings were too raw to get caught up in that kind of discussion. 'The lad may not be the fastest worker in the world, but by God, he's thorough – I'll not deny that.'

'Yes, but all those smaller jobs are finished now,' Aggie

said. 'And I dare say he'll be keen to get started on the old barn, just like Michael planned. It'll be a secure job for him as well.' She peered out of the window towards the dilapidated barn. 'By! There has to be at least a year's work there. Aye, that's what he'll be after, right enough . . . a steady run o' work right through to next spring.'

'Look, lass, yer mustn't forget who's holding the purse-strings,' the old fella cautioned. 'That miserable brother o' yourn won't part with a penny more than he has to. I mean, he only paid the lad for all his work, 'cause he'd only just got here and wanted to mek a suitable impression.'

Aggie knew that but, 'It won't matter either way, if he doesn't have John back to repair the barn,' she remarked warily. 'I imagine the lad can get work wherever he wants.' She knew he had a good reputation. 'They say as how he can turn a hand to anything.'

Thomas Isaac looked up. 'Between you an' me, lass, I reckon young John is after summat other than work.'

'What's on your mind then?'

He frowned. 'If yer ask me, there's summat going on,' he ventured knowingly.

'Oh? And what might *that* be then?'

He looked her in the eye. 'Yer know very well,' he tutted.

And it was true – she did. These past weeks she had been meaning to speak with Emily about the growing friendship between her and John, only work had got in the way. 'You're not to worry,' she told the old fella. 'Our Emily's a sensible lass.'

'She's missing her da.'

'What's that got to do with it?' Fear, and a measure of anger rippled through her. 'We're *all* missing him. It doesn't mean to say we'll throw caution to the winds.'

'Emily's just a lass. She'll be looking for someone to talk to . . . someone near her own age.'

'I know that, Dad, and I'm sure that's all the two of 'em

will be doing – talking to each other. They're just friends, after all.'

He took a deep breath. 'Happen!' That was all he had to say on the matter. But he could *think*, and what he thought was this: there was trouble brewing. He could feel it in his tired old bones.

Outside, Clem rounded the farmhouse and, coming face to face with the young man, demanded to know his business.

Though needfully respectful, John Hanley was not afraid of this bully. It showed in his confident stance, and in the way he spoke, quietly determined. 'I came to have a talk with you, sir,' he replied, 'if you could spare me a few minutes?'

'Oh! So you've come to 'ave a talk with me, 'ave yer?' The older man regarded the other with derision, and a certain amount of envy. He saw the lean, strong frame of this capable young man, and he was reminded of his own shortcomings. The eyes, too, seemed to hold a man whether he wanted to look into them or not; deepest blue and fired with confidence, they were mesmerising.

'It won't take long, sir.' While Clem took stock of him, John did the same of the older man.

He had no liking for Clem Jackson. Nor did he respect him, but he owed this bully a certain address, for it was Clem Jackson who appeared to have taken charge of things round here, including Emily. And it was Emily he had come about this morning.

Stamping his two feet, the older man impatiently shifted himself. 'Get on with it then, damn yer!' he instructed roughly. 'Spit it out! I'm a busy man. I've no time to wait on such as you!'

Taking a deep breath, John said, 'I've come to ask if you will allow me and Emily to walk out together?'

'Yer what!' Growing red in the face, Clem screamed at him, 'Yer devious little bastard! You'd best get from my front door, afore I blow you to bloody Kingdom Come!' Beside him, Badger's hackles were raised, and he growled low in his throat.

Raising the shotgun, Clem aimed it at John's throat, his one eye trained down the barrel and his finger trembling on the trigger. 'I'll count to ten, and if yer not well away by then, yer'll not be leaving on yer own two feet, I can promise yer *that*!'

With his heart beating fifteen to the dozen, John stood his ground. 'We're just friends, sir,' he said quietly. 'There's nothing untoward between us. Only, I am very fond of her, and I know she's fond of me, because she's said so. But it's all right and proper, sir. I respect Emily too much to harm her in any way.'

At any minute, this madman might pull the trigger, or that hound might fly at his throat, but John felt compelled to say his piece. He and Emily had these strong feelings: in truth, they were growing to love each other in a way that only a man and woman could love. Now, it was time to put it all on a proper footing.

'All we want is for the two of us to spend more time together . . . out in the open, without any shame.'

Oh dear Lord. John knew he was saying all the right things, only they seemed to be coming out all wrong. 'Look, sir, I didn't come here to cause trouble, and you mustn't blame Emily. She doesn't even know I'm here. I just wanted us to be together and not to be hiding like we do. And for that, we need your permission.' He paused, at a loss. 'I hope you'll consider what I'm saying?'

He had been expecting the shotgun to ring out any minute. Instead it was suddenly swung high in the air and when it came down on his temple, he hardly felt the pain, although he stumbled backwards and fell down – he felt the wet, sticky blood trickling across his face.

As he crumpled to the ground, he received a second blow. Time and again the heavy butt of the shotgun rained down, dulling his senses and his thinking, until he knew that if he didn't get up now, he would never get up again. But each time he made the effort, he was knocked back by another blow, or a kick of the older man's heavy boot. Somewhere in his distant mind he could hear Jackson yelling obscenities, but the voice came from so far away, and his every bone jolted with the force of the beating.

Inside the farmhouse, Aggie had seen what was happening, and she ran to the door. As she flung it open, she saw with horror how John had scrambled back on his feet and was launching himself at Clem, his eyes blinded by the blood that was pouring down his head and face. 'NO!' Careering forward she tried to come between the two men but was driven back. 'Stay out of it!' she was told. 'Unless you want some an' all?'

But Aggie would not be stopped. Throwing herself between them, she screamed: 'Leave him be! For God's sake, Clem . . . you're killing the lad!'

'Out – of – my – way!' With one mighty shove, Clem sent her sprawling to the ground. In a minute she was on her knees, her two arms round the young man, and her face upturned.

'Kill him, and you'll have to kill me too,' she said, her eyes filled with hatred.

His answer was to reach out and drag her away, but she crawled back, fiercely protecting John with her own body. 'I mean it, Clem. I won't let you do it.'

'I'll do what I see fit. Get outta the bloody way!'

'NO!' She tried appealing to any sense of decency he might still have. 'He's just a boy!' she cried. 'Shame on you, hitting him with your gun . . . that's a coward's way!'

When at that moment John tried feebly to get up, she pressed the full weight of her body against his. 'No!' she

hissed. 'Stay down, John. *Please!* Stay down!' She knew if he got up, it might be the last thing he ever did.

Eager to finish what he had started, Clem took a step forward. 'LET HIM UP!' Suddenly the muzzle of the shotgun was jammed into hr side. 'Let him up, or I swear to God I'll finish the pair of you!'

'No!' Aggie knew, from the mad look in his eyes, that he meant every word. And still she wouldn't budge. At the back of her mind she hoped and prayed that somewhere in that warped mind, he had a shred of compassion.

Instead he gave her a vicious kick that sent her flying. She coiled up, whimpering from the pain.

Enraged, John struggled to his feet and, staggering towards the older man, managed to send him backwards, but he was weak and hurt, and it was only a matter of seconds before he himself was at the receiving end again. Bloodied and dazed by the punishment he had taken, he found himself sprawled on the ground, with the shotgun pushed tight against his throat. 'Yer pack a sizable punch, an' yer a hard man to put down, I'll give yer that!' Clem grudgingly admitted. 'But it'll do yer no good.'

Puffing and panting from John's determined attack, he gave a harsh, mocking laugh. 'Happen I shoulda took yer on, man to man. But I ain't got time for all that. Not when it's so much easier just to pull the trigger.'

The deadly click of the trigger-hammer being drawn back echoed against Aggie's scream. 'NO, CLEM . . . FOR PITY'S SAKE, NO!'

They didn't see the old man as he sneaked out of the house. It was only when he was directly behind Clem, that Aggie spotted him and her heart fell. Dear God! If Clem turned, her father-in-law wouldn't stand a chance.

Thankfully, Clem was far too intent on training his eye on John, so that when he did hear a movement behind him and felt the cold sharp end of the shotgun thrust into his

neck, it was too late. 'You ain't the only one who knows how to use one o' these!' Thomas Isaac chuckled. 'I expect you thought I were too old and past it to shift outta my rocking-chair?'

Shocked and frightened, Clem began to plead. 'Now then, Grandad, don't do anything silly. Put the gun down.'

But the old fella had no intention of doing that, as he told Clem in no uncertain terms. 'I can't see yer hammer that young man into the ground, without doing summat about it.' He slowly raised the shotgun, until it was level with Clem's forehead. 'Happen I should just blow yer ugly 'ead off, right now.'

Fearing for his life, Clem stretched his arms up. 'All right, all right! What d'yer want from me?'

'I want you to leave the lad alone!'

Searching for a way out of a bad situation, Clem appealed to him. 'Open yer eyes, man! Can't yer see the young scoundrel's got a yearning for the girl? That's what he's 'ere for . . . to ask if the pair of 'em can couple up. Is that what yer want for yer granddaughter . . . to be tekken advantage of by this young thug?'

Thomas pursed his lips in thought. 'I don't reckon John has any such thing in mind, but even if 'e *did* want to see our Emily, then I'd say that was for her mammy to deal with, wouldn't yer agree?'

'If yer say so.' It galled him to kow-tow to the old man.

'I *do* say so.' Thomas saw how Aggie was helping John to his feet. 'Ain't that right, Aggie, lass?' he asked pointedly. 'Anything to do with our Emily is first and foremost *your* business?'

She nodded. 'Leave it now, Dad. It's all right.' She feared he might well have taken on more than he could handle. 'I'm sure Clem knows the score, now you've spelled it out.'

She considered asking him to go back inside but it would have been of no use. From somewhere – she didn't know

where – her father-in-law had gathered enough strength and courage to come out and fight for his loved ones – and what right had she to interfere? No right at all, she decided, with a little burst of pride.

All the same, just now she had seen Clem eyeing the old fella with a cunning look on his face. And it worried her. One way or another, she needed to get them all back inside and out of harm's way. 'Come on now, Dad,' she urged. 'Give me a hand to get John inside, will you?'

Unfortunately her little ploy came too late, for just then, while her father-in-law was observing young John's sorry plight, Clem made a sudden move that took everyone by surprise. With the cry of a madman, he lunged forward to wrench the shotgun out of the old fella's hands. 'Yer never learn, do yer?' he snarled. 'I should empty this barrel into yer dozy skull.'

Proud and defiant, the old man looked him in the eye. 'You don't frighten me,' he declared. 'I've had more experience of bullies in my life than you'll ever know, and they're allus brought down, somehow or another.'

Clem laughed aloud at his show of defiance. 'Hmh! So, yer reckon you can bring me down, do yer?' With a poke of his finger in Thomas's bony ribs he jeered, 'An' how do yer plan to do that, might I ask?'

The old farmer shook his head. 'I don't know yet,' he answered, 'but I'll find a way in time. Right now, you've got the upper hand – but it won't allus be like that.'

'Really?' Leaning forward with his face almost touching that of the old fella's, the younger man demanded, 'Got some money tucked away, 'ave yer? Manage without me, can yer?'

'I wish to Gawd I had got money behind me!' the old man replied harshly. 'You'd soon be on yer way, an' no mistake!'

Clem merely laughed. 'All show and gab, that's what you

are. Go on! Get outta my road!' With a hefty push he sent Thomas Isaac toppling backwards, into the wall. 'As for you . . . !' Grabbing Aggie by the arm, he wrenched it up behind her back, making her almost faint with the pain.

Blood pouring from his wounds, the injured youth took a step forward as if to go for Clem yet again. 'Take your hands off her!' His mouth was so swollen he could hardly spit out the words.

'Or what?' Clem jabbed at him with the shotgun. 'Look at yer!' he jibed. 'By! Yer can hardly bloody stand.'

'I can stand up to you any day.' Squaring up, John clenched his fists. 'Come on. I'm ready when you are!'

'I would stop while the going's good,' Clem warned him angrily. 'I haven't got time for games.' Turning his attention to Aggie, he ordered her to, 'Get that old fool inside, and stay outta my sight, the pair of youse.' Jerking a thumb to John, he suggested fiercely, 'I'll deal with this young thug!'

Aggie was in a dilemma. She couldn't let go of the old fella, who by now was growing heavy and limp in her arms, and she feared for John, who was in a bad way. 'You heard what Dad said,' she answered with a warning. 'If it's to do with our Emily, then it's for *me* to deal with it.' Beckoning John she told him, 'Come inside, lad. I need to see what damage is done.'

John shook his head. 'There's no need,' he answered. 'I'm all right. Look, you'd best do as he says . . . take Mr Ramsden inside.' The last thing he had wanted was to cause trouble for Emily's family.

Aggie hesitated, but then Clem said meaningfully: 'You've got a choice, woman. Yer can watch me use the shotgun on this young bugger, or you can go inside, while I try and talk some sense into 'im.' He kept a wary eye on John. 'It's up to you,' he told her. 'Either way don't bother me.'

Aggie looked at John, who gave her a smile and a nod.

'Go on,' he urged. 'Go inside.' He gestured at Thomas. 'He's all done in.'

Clem appeared to have calmed down somewhat, so Aggie had little choice, because now the old man was beginning to shiver, and so was she. The ordeal of facing up to Clem had taken its toll.

'Come on, Dad,' she said kindly, letting him lean on her. 'You've had enough excitement for one day.'

Hoping things would settle down now, she guided him inside.

Once they were gone, Clem turned on John, though he deliberately kept his distance. 'You want the girl, don't yer?' His voice was little more than a whisper, with a certain inference that riled the younger man. 'Want 'er real bad, don't yer?'

John knew well enough what he was implying and answered him with a rush of disgust. 'Not in the way *you* mean.'

'Oh, an' what way is that?'

'Whatever you might think, I would never take advantage of Emily,' John said proudly. 'I mean to wed her – if she'll have me.'

Clem took a step forward, the anger reddening his face. '*I'll* tell yer what you'll do, you young pup! You'll stay away from my niece. In fact, you'll get as far away from 'er as you can, an' never show yer face round these parts again.'

John shook his head. 'I'm not going anywhere. Like I said, I mean to wed her one day.'

'So you'll defy me, is that it?'

'You can do your worst, Mr Jackson, but I'll never leave her!'

For a time they regarded each other, the air heavy with

hatred. When next Clem spoke, it was to dash all John's hopes into the ground.

'What if I decided not to punish you, after all?' he asked cunningly. 'What if I decided it were *the girl* that's bad – and not you at all? By! A young harlot like that would need some discipline, wouldn't yer say?'

As he watched the horror unfold on John's face, he chewed the fleshy part of his bottom lip, like an animal devouring its prey. And all the while observing John, with a sense of delight that he could hardly conceal. 'Yer wouldn't like that, I'll be bound, but there'd be nowt yer could do about it.'

'I could rip your heart out . . . that's what I could do!' Stumbling forward, John realised he was in no fit state to do anything at that minute, but he wouldn't let this bully beat him. He couldn't let Emily be hurt. 'You touch one hair on her head, and I swear to God, I'll kill you.'

The dog bared its teeth at him and growled.

Clem merely took a step back. 'You're not going to kill anybody!' he snapped. 'But if yer think anything of the girl, you'll get as far away from this place as you can, and as quick as yer can! Because if you don't, it'll be Emily that suffers, I can promise yer that.'

With a flick of his wrist he had John by the throat and the gun pushed into his belly. 'I could do for yer right now,' he whispered, 'but there's no need. I can see now how I might have got it all wrong, and that it really were the girl that led you on.' He gave a little sideways turn and spat on the ground. 'Yon Emily's no more than a little slut – I can see that now. She needs teaching a lesson, that's what!'

He gave a sly wink. 'If you were to sling yer hook and clear off from round these parts, I dare say she would realise her mistake and be the good girl she allus was.' His face darkened. 'But if yer insist on staying, I reckon she'll just

go on being bad. An' then – well, I'd have no option but to give her a good hiding.'

Struggling to free himself, John was frantic.

'The thing is,' Clem took pleasure from seeing the boy cornered, 'I can do whatever I want. Like the old man said, it's *me* that's got the upper hand round this place, and it's me that will 'ave to keep order, if yer know what I mean?'

'You hurt her, and it'll be the last thing you do.'

'Oh, I *will* hurt her! I'll have to, won't I – unless you do as I ask. Look now, if you really are fond of the girl, you'll sling yer hook an' never come back. Do that, an' the girl will be safe. But if yer defy me, then like I say, it won't be *you* as suffers. It'll be *her*. An' even if by some unlikely chance you get to me afterwards – well, by then it'll be too late, won't it?' Grinning wickedly, he let his next words sink in. 'Because I'll 'ave got to our Emily first.'

'You bastard!'

'Oh, I'll not deny it.' Clem paused, before going on in a low, trembling whisper. 'You're right – I am a bastard. Of the worst kind.' His eyes hardened until they shone like marbles. 'It might pay yer to remember that.'

With that he turned away and strode into the distance, Badger trotting at his side, leaving John to reflect on his words. And the more John thought on them, the more afraid he was – for Emily.

Because now he knew without a shadow of doubt that Clem Jackson was capable of anything, even murder.

Down at the brook, Emily had no idea of the horrible scenes happening up at the farm. All she knew was that John had arranged to meet her here at their usual place, and now here she was, patiently waiting for him, her heart leaping at every sound and her face flushed with anticipation.

Time and again she had wandered along the water's edge, her eyes trained on the top field. She knew from their meetings in the past, it was the track he would take. Never once had he been late, not even when he had to put in extra work. He always got through it in time to be there when he promised.

Today, though, he was already late, she thought anxiously. And what did he have to tell her that was so urgent?

When they spoke last night, and he told her he would have some good news for her today, there had been a sparkle in his eye, making her think that he was going to see her mammy, and maybe ask if it was all right for him and Emily to start courting. She smiled at that. 'A surprise' – that's all he would say, so now she would have to wait and see what it was.

Waiting wasn't so hard though, she told herself. Not if she knew for certain he would be there.

Sitting cross-legged on the bank, with the sound of the brook playing over the boulders, she felt so content. This was a beautiful place, where the two of them had sat many a time over the past six months or so, talking and laughing, putting the world to rights. Making plans, dreaming dreams, and every passing minute, learning to love each other. John had been at Potts End Farm for just on eight months now, living with his Aunt Lizzie in a cottage over the rise in Salmesbury. Nearly twenty years old, the lad had been just a good friend to Thomas's granddaughter for a few weeks, chatting to her while he worked on the wagons, and occasionally helping her with the animals when his own chores were done. From being good mates, the two of them had discovered love, and by now, each knew they were made for the other.

While she waited for John, Emily watched the late spring lambs at play and smiled. God's world was a wonderful place, she thought.

Just then, a fat little lamb came to her side, curious as to what she was doing there. She ran her hands along its woolly shoulders. 'My! You get bigger every time I see you.' She laughed when it skipped off to find its mother. 'Look at you . . . tapping your mammy for milk, and you're almost as big as she is, poor thing.' She watched with pleasure as the lamb nuzzled under the ewe's belly, its tail wagging and its mouth locked onto its mammy's long red teat, while the noise of its sucking echoed in that quiet morning air.

Emily loved it here. The bottom field was the furthest from the house and the prettiest of all. With the ragged hedges of dog roses and other wild flowers spilling their colour across the skyline, and the soft ripple of water as it meandered along, she thought this must be as close to Paradise as anybody could get.

Here in this idyllic place, alone or with John, she could sit and think, and wonder, and hope that one day, her Uncle Clem would leave and their world would be happy again.

For now though, as the lambs skipped about her, she held out her arms and embracing the smallest of the flock, she gazed into its big dark eyes. The love in her heart spilled over. 'His name is John,' she whispered into its woolly ear. 'We like each other a lot, and one day, maybe we'll get married.' Her face flushed a bashful pink. 'Oh, I don't mean he's told me that's what he wants, but I can feel it,' she said to the wriggling creature. 'At least, I *hope* he wants to marry me, because I don't think I'll ever want to marry anybody else.'

A sudden awareness filled her young heart. 'I really do love him,' she confided. 'I must do, because when we're together I'm so happy, I don't even let Clem upset me. Then, when we're apart, I feel so lonely.' She looked to the top field. 'He'll be here any minute. Isn't that wonderful!'

Giving the lamb a final hug, she took a leisurely stroll

along the water's edge. Her thoughts lingered with John, and the possibility of spending the rest of her life with him. It was a daring, wonderful thought, and it brought a smile to her face. I wonder what he's got to tell me? she asked herself for the twentieth time.

Once again, she trained her gaze on the top field. Still no sign of him, but it didn't matter. There was time enough before she had to be back. Besides, if she had to, she would wait for him for ever.

Filled with the energy of youth, she began to run, gently at first, her bare feet feeling every bump and curve of the land. Soon though, urged on by a rush of exhilaration, she was running like the wind, her hair loose and lifted by the breeze, and her strong legs covering the ground with surprising speed. Caught up in her own private joy, she didn't notice the locked fly from around her neck and lose itself in a path of sweet-scented clover.

Laughing out loud, on she ran, along the brook's edge, then through the cool water and back again.

Thrilled to see the lambs leaping after her, she led them up and down, but they stopped at the stream's edge and, in spite of her cajoling, would not enter the water. So she played the game and took great delight in their company. She ran and splashed and ran again, up the field and down with the lambs in pursuit. Until at last she fell in a heap, exhausted and happy, certain that today was special.

Because John had some important news to tell her.



Lying there, spreadeagled on the grass, her face uplifted to the sun and her heart pounding, Emily had never felt so alive. 'I love him!' she shouted to the elements. 'I LOVE HIM!' Her smile deepened and her laughter was a joyful sound that echoed across the fields.

She felt free out here; free to say what was in her heart. Free to be herself and not be afraid.

It was a wonderful feeling.