

The Gallows Girl

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Extract

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Chapter One

They called it the road of the dead, the people who came to our inn.

On a map it was little thicker than a hair. Outside our gates it was a rutted dustbowl in summer and awash with mud during most of the winter. But a long time ago, before my grandfather walked this land, the road swam with blood. And with tears.

All our years we'd lived under the shadow of the noose. My sister Lucy was seventeen. I was fifteen. Maybe sixteen. Mother wasn't sure. She never spoke much about my swaddling days, even in one of her softer moods.

Those moods were getting harder to find as if time was pinching her cheeks into sour lemons, running ahead of her ambitions as she grew older and less able to catch the swift, flighty years. Angered, she had a voice that could peel potatoes. When she gusted into a room conversation tailed off, people pulled their chairs closer to the hearth, candles seemed to flicker and dim.

The first thing you noticed was her mouth. Always on the move, always changing shape with the breezy currents of her voice. Words tumbled out of it like milk spilling over the lip of a jug. Oh she could smile, but it now took more to stretch the corners of that dry mouth. A new bonnet from Prestbury market was no longer enough, nor a silver trinket, nor scented ribbons. But when an eligible young

gentleman looked twice at Lucy, aye, that blew the clouds from Mother's face.

Though we had our own bedchambers, Lucy and I had the pick of the guest rooms when business was slack, usually after heavy rain when the lykeaway turned to a swamp. As toddlers we slept between Mother and Isaac in the square bed that filled their room above the porch, later moving into cots beside the window. When we grew too big even for those I told Isaac I wanted to be near the stables. Most of my chores took me into the yard and I never tired of watching travellers arrive. He painted out an old store-room, laid planks across a few bricks and topped it with a straw mattress. Later he built me a proper bed, a small dresser and a wardrobe. I only ever needed two gowns. The one I worked the taproom in, and the one I wore to greet the carriages.

'Rachel, coach.'

Mother's voice rolled down the hall. I glanced at the clock then checked myself in the looking glass. Too tall, too fat. Dark haired instead of fair. Isaac joked that I must be the child of some travelling man but we all knew what he really meant.

We never talked that much about the family. Grandfather died before Isaac met and married Mother. His own wife had already lain ten years in Prestbury churchyard. I heard he was a thin man who never spoke much. He won Green Gallows in a fist fight and built it up from the gutted shell of an old posting house that used to serve the lykeaway. Isaac spoke of his father as if he still lived in the inn or was just around the corner of the yard.

Harriet Wheeler was an orphan when Isaac took her to the altar. Her papa was a Portsmouth caulker who broke his neck when he tumbled, drunk, off a harbour wall at low tide. His wife died of grief, Mother claimed. Harriet herself was quite the belle of the town and a lure for the eye of every lad she passed. The ghost of that beauty could be glimpsed sometimes when she napped in the parlour

armchair and sleep lifted the hardness from her face. I didn't know the name of the fellow who finally snared her heart. Isaac knew it but wouldn't ever say, not even when sharing a pipe and ale with the horsemaster. The subject festered like a blocked ditch, something that bubbled over every so often. But it was also slippery, like a thief. You rarely saw it except in a flash of anger from Isaac, or a glance full of bitterness from Mother. I knew that I was a part of this poison but I didn't talk about it either. It was supposed to be their secret, after all.

I leaned towards the mirror and grinned. My reflection grinned back. I was an unlikely cuckoo.

I scooped my hat off the bed and tripped out into the hall. The scents of cooking, fresh linen and fermenting ale mingled with the stink of pisspots and burning peat bricks. Hannah scampered past, smothered in damp blankets. She'd not get those dry before the morning's rain returned.

I slipped into the Long Room. 'Lizabeth, never far from Mother, was using a tattered rag to wipe grease stains off the table. She frowned as I passed. I ignored her. Mother was checking ale barrels as they were loaded into the cellar beneath the taproom. Cool air from the stable yard gusted through the open door. I stepped, blinking, into the daylight and crammed my tricorne over my ears. Murky puddles dotted the yard. A night of heavy rain had washed all the colour out of the countryside. Bitter gales often hurled themselves like whooping ghosts across the Downs. Judd maintained it had been the coldest summer he could remember and he had been horsemaster ten years.

I shivered and took my place near the mounting block. It was something of an eyesore, our yard. Not sensibly square like most, but full of crooked angles and swallow-me-up shadows. Pedlars hawked wares and nostrums. Sometimes there was a tame squirrel or bullfinch. Usually there were ribbons, hand carved wooden trinkets or clothes pegs.

Green Gallows was the best pitch on the South Road. Not too close to Stonehill so that horses were changed when still

fresh, nor too far towards the coast. Last summer things got so bad with hawkers jostling one another and squabbling with gypsies that scuffles broke out. One nostrum seller was pushed under the wheels of the Prestbury stage, snapping both legs. Passengers alighting from coaches were pestered and had their pockets picked.

Isaac closed the gate to the traders. He went among them as they stood in the lane, naming those who could work his yard and charging a penny a day for the privilege. Those with the best wares, Isaac let in. The rest, the vagabonds and beggars – those trying to peddle rags or badly carved baubles – were left outside to hawk their chattels as best they could.

Isaac moved among his chosen, inspecting goods, throwing out troublemakers. Men tugged off their caps. Women bobbed curtsies. Some offered gifts but Isaac took nothing.

In the middle of it all, Green Gallows Inn sat like a large felt hat stolen by a gust of wind and left abandoned at the side of the road. No one knew whether the walls held the roof up or whether the roof held the walls together. Cracked walls, stung with ivy and sagging outwards like old men's bellies. Upstairs, oak floorboards rose and dipped as if obeying some unseen, ancient tide. Chestnut panels were stained black with pipe smoke and spilled brandy. Windows were scattered reluctantly like loose chip-pings across the cream-washed walls.

It was always dark in Green Gallows, but never cold. Hot fires burned at its heart. The walls sucked in the warmth, held to it as a mother would a swaddled baby. Even in the depths of the most cheek-biting winter the place was as cosy as a womb.

Through the parlour window I spied Lucy seated at the cheap spinet Isaac had brought home from an auction in Prestbury. It had belonged to the old parson, he claimed, and what matter if the frame was a little warped or some of the keys chipped? Lucy's brow was pinched with concentration. Her corn-tinted hair had been bunched up behind

her head and strangled with a blue ribbon. Isaac sweated behind her, mouth working furiously. Her fingers scrabbled up the keyboard, snapped back, scrabbled up again. Isaac said something else. She didn't look up. He wiped his brow, paced to the door then turned back and started shouting again.

I felt a familiar prick of irritation. The temptation to run up and bang on the window was strong. Why did she let him treat her like that? Why didn't she slam down the spinet lid, tell him to play the thing himself if he wanted it done so well, and storm out of the room? Isaac had never lifted his hand to her. She could stand up to him if she really wanted to.

I didn't go near the window. I was always full of ideas about what my sister should and shouldn't be doing and it hadn't brought me a day's peace. From the stables came the jingle of harnesses where Judd was preparing the team. Opposite, the kitchen door swung open and Matthew crossed the yard, a wooden pail dangling from his hand. He could balance a coach on a pin but could not call his own body to heel. He moved like an oak tree in a gale, limbs swinging. Often buckets went flying, people were knocked off their feet and no door could be passed through without his bony hips thumping against the frame. He bumped his head, barked his shins, lost tufts of hair when he climbed down the hayloft ladder and shut the trapdoor on his skull. Sally banned him from the kitchen when his rump sent a tray of freshly baked tarts, made with raspberries it had taken her half that morning to pick, crashing to the tiles.

Sally didn't believe in a gentle clip round the ear. She went after him with a cake knife and Matthew was lucky to escape with nothing more than a slit in his breeches and raspberry juice caking his boots.

Most thought Matthew a surly pup but I knew better. His face had high cheekbones spiked with a long nose and black tufted eyebrows. Local girls mocked him. I had done my share of laughing too.

But his eyes smiled all the time, the smiles sometimes leaking into the tiny cracks that lined the corners of his eyelids. He had woman's hands, with restless fingers that fiddled with cuffs or buttons when not busy elsewhere. His knuckles were scabbed where he kept punching the wall. Every time he did something foolish: 'Thwack!'. Every time he lost an argument or was told off: 'Thwack!'. Whenever he tripped over his own feet: 'Thwack!'. At least he hit the brickwork and not someone's mouth.

Sometimes Lucy rode to Marrin's Ridge with Matthew acting as groom.

'D'you trust them together?' I'd asked Isaac, irked that my duties prevented me from joining them.

He was sitting on an upturned pail, sun playing over his tanned skin. He swallowed the lump of bread he'd been chewing and washed it down with a swig of ale.

'With a man, no,' he said, grinning. 'I don't see there's aught to worry about with Matthew.'

I waved from my place by the mounting block. Matthew's thin face peeled into a grin. I returned the smile. I wanted the changeovers to go smoothly. Isaac was always in a foul temper after tutoring Lucy and it would go bad with Matthew if one of the horses was skittish or he couldn't balance the coach. His cheeks coloured. Stupidly, he started to whistle.

'Shut that racket up,' Judd boomed from the open stable door. 'If ye're as jolly with the harness as ye are with that tune we'll both have plenty to sing about before the day is done. Bring it over here and hold this beast while I slip it on.'

A clattering of hooves from the lane, a voice barking orders, the crack of a whip. I straightened my hat. Six times a week we'd get the Portsmouth stagecoach packed full of merchantmen and naval officers bound for the coast. Some greeted me by name and gave me pretty trinkets from the London shops.

Lucy never had much to do with the carriages. 'You'll

snag your petticoats,' Mother warned, 'or put blisters on the ends of your fingers. Then where will you be, eh? Let Rachel do it. She has the knack.'

Lucy never got mud on her cheeks or straw from the hayloft caught in her skirts. Her glossy hair had never been blown by the strong westerly winds into a wild tangle about her cheeks. The smell of horse dung was foreign to nostrils suffocated by lavender and jasmine.

Once I found her standing beside the old gallows from which our inn sign hung. She was staring down the lane in the direction of Prestbury village. I was helping Hannah unload eggs from the tradesman's wagon. One burst apart in my hands and, amidst coarse laughter, I had gone to wipe them on the grass beside the gate. Longing, such longing casting shadows across Lucy's face, as if she wanted to hitch up her skirts and just run and run down the lane, not stopping or looking back, ever.

'Why don't you just go if you hate it here so much?' I'd blurted.

She looked at me and frowned. 'Why don't you?'

I shrugged. 'I like working with the horses, I suppose.'

'You like working with the horses.' Lucy turned back towards the house. 'There's no world for you beyond our gate, is there?'

That afternoon I tried to sit and read with her in the parlour. I was too slow and stumbled over the sentences. But I'd glean odd words and phrases from Lucy and use them without thinking. Sometimes it surprised me how much I could match her. It surprised our guests too, being greeted at the carriage door by a country girl with a fancy mouth. Mother seemed put out, though Isaac laughed and dismissed it as harmless parrotry. I think Mother was worried that if I could learn pretty words from Lucy then she could pick up bad habits from me. The ostlers had notoriously foul mouths and I was always in their company. Yet every coach that clattered into Green Gallows was a different world, a wooden egg ready to hatch a flurry of faces –

laughing, chattering, scowling – into my busy life.

The drumbeat of hooves slowed. The carriage heaved into the yard, horses snorting in the sharp morning air. Faces peered from the windows while on top another half-dozen wind-battered souls clung to the roof.

From the driver's seat, Gregor winked and tossed down a penny, which I caught with practised ease. Matthew began unharnessing the foam-flanked leaders. Judd joined him, wiping his hands on his leather breeches.

'How are the roads, Gregor?'

'Not too bad, considering.' The coachman looped the reins around the iron hook beside his seat. 'Summer's baked 'em hard and the water's just sluicing off.' He peered up at the sky. 'Weather's just about spent, I'd say. This dirty lot will have run its course come afternoon. Should stay dry 'til the end of the week, maybe longer. Tell your pretty wife she can wear her best bonnet to church this Sunday without fear of a drenching.'

Judd laughed. 'My Sally ain't got a best bonnet and if she had you'd have to nail it to her head. Now, how are the horses?'

Gregor nodded towards the snorting animals. 'One of the wheelers has thrown a shoe. I drove the team as easy as I dared, but she was pulling badly by the time we reached the Ridge.'

Judd bent down to take a look. 'She a lame 'un, right enough.' He straightened up. 'Isaac won't like that. You know how he feels about swapping good horses for limpers.'

Gregor chuckled. 'I know how he feels about not getting his customers on time.'

Leather springs creaked as the passengers clambered off the roof. Gregor's darkie coachman started handing down sacks and baggage. His name was Sammy and he was as big as a mountain. The luggage was unloaded in less than a minute. Gravel crunched when his big feet thumped onto the ground. He grinned harpsichord keys.

‘Are you a slave?’ I once asked him.

He’d bent over, his big flat face looming in my vision like an avalanche of coal. ‘Are you?’

I swept forward, placed the mounting block and opened the carriage door. The smile slipped easily across my face.

‘Welcome to Green Gallows,’ I said to the first pillow-cloud of petticoats that feathered down the steps. An old woman in a young dress. I bit back a giggle and held out my hand. She grunted before accepting my help, red-rimmed eyes blinking in her withered face.

I took one gloved hand after another, searching for regular travellers. Perhaps Robert who smelled of sour apples, or Geoffrey who never shaved except on Tuesdays. Most were good for a penny tip, maybe more if I was lucky. Five grumpy faces followed one another, squinting, into the daylight. Clothes were smoothed down and aching limbs stretched in the blustery yard.

Don’t bring ’em in straightaway, Isaac told me on the day I ran out to greet my first coach. My twelfth birthday, or was it my thirteenth? Let ’em shiver a bit. They’ll spend a few more pennies on hot food, linger a little longer in front of the hearth. More time in my inn is more money spent. Don’t forget.

There, at last, Sailor Ben. Always good for sixpence, or perhaps a chip of toffee if his sweet tooth had itched during the journey. He travelled regularly between his London house and the Portsmouth docks. Long white hair ran in a plaited rope to his waist and buckles the size of window frames silvered his boots.

‘Bless me if it isn’t a little wood sprite come to greet us,’ he declared, rolling on his stout legs like a cannon full of damp gunpowder, ‘all tucked up in her green dress with an enchanting smile on her lips. What about a bit of silver to deepen that smile, eh, my young enchantress?’

He held out a sixpence, a tempting sweetmeat pinched between thumb and forefinger. An old game, but I was now the quicker. I plucked the coin out of his grasp before he

had time to pull back his arm. He stared at his empty fingers for a second and then exploded into laughter. ‘Blow me if you’re not as quick as a cat. Quicker I’d say. You’d make a dandy pickpocket my dear – have my watch out of my waistcoat before I could sneeze, I don’t doubt.’

I grinned, one eye on the passengers, making sure their patience wasn’t wearing too thin. Those who’d clambered down from the roof, the wheelwrights, coopers and sailors, had already disappeared into the taproom in search of ale and a hot potato. I led my group through the porch and into the Long Room to be served boiled fowl and French beans followed by cheesecake or gooseberry pie.

Once they were settled I headed for the taproom. Hannah was already serving armfuls of foaming ale jugs to the chattering customers. I slipped around the tables and joined her in the narrow space between barrels and counter.

‘This lot behaving themselves?’ I asked, tying a hessian apron over my gown. ‘They seem a lively crowd today.’

Hannah grunted and dumped half-a-dozen empty tankards onto the counter. ‘Their thirst is keen enough, but some don’t want to pay. They think that because they’ve stumped up a couple of shillings to cling to the outside of a coach then that entitles them to free ale at every lodging house they call at. Well I’ve had that trick tried on me before and the horse trough is hungry for any wastrel that don’t want to dip into his pocket.’ She pushed the tankards over the counter. ‘Fill these for me, will you, Rachel. I’ve men screaming for mutton pie and Sally’s threatened to throw their potatoes into the yard if I don’t go right away and fetch ’em out of the kitchen.’

I nodded, pouring ale into the first tankard before Hannah had finished speaking. About two dozen people filled the smoke-gutted room. Some would be clambering back onto Gregor’s coach once the team had been changed. Others would be travelling locally, often hitching rides on any wagons that travelled around the farms between Stonehill and Prestbury. Working men often stayed

overnight in our cheapest rooms but some labourers or sailors would drive a harder bargain still. Judd laughed when he thought of the number of times someone had offered him a penny to sleep in the hayloft.

I placed the brimming tankard onto the counter and started filling the next. At one table a dice game was in progress and in the far corner a cluster of dowdily dressed men squabbled over cards. Not for them the sophistication of hazard or piquet, but local games, brewed in the alehouses clustered around the south coast docks. Games with crude stakes where the aim was to deal the cards quickly and win or lose in an instant. As I watched, one fellow roared with glee and scooped up a pile of coins while his companions sullenly looked on. Trouble there later, perhaps.

I filled a third tankard. Judd and Isaac once caught a footpad working the lykeway and beat the fellow, who was built like a shire horse, to within an inch of his life. Afterwards, they tied a cut-off noose around his neck as a warning and booted him in the direction of Prestbury. The road between the village and Marrin's Ridge miraculously cleared of criminals though it was Will Davey, the local constable, who got the thanks.

A customer with a laugh like a dog's bark approached the bar, scooped up the ale pots and winked at me before carrying them back to his friends. With Isaac tucked away in the Long Room trying to impress his better bred guests, I was happy pouring ale for the next hour or so. Hannah and I held our own, filled them up, kept them happy. The man who'd won at cards kept his luck and tipped me a shilling. Hannah got sixpence, and thought herself ill-used. 'I'll give you half,' I said to shut her up.

The door to the Long Room blustered open. 'Lizabeth rushed in, her cheeks flushed and ripe with sweat. 'They want more port,' she said. 'Rachel, help me fetch some bottles from the cellar.'

She swept the keys off their hook and clunked open the

cellar door. From the Long Room I caught a snatch of a song – Lucy entertaining the gentry with her high, dove voice. Sometimes Isaac pushed the spinet through from the parlour and she would play for hours at a time, usually when Sir this or Lord that was accompanied by his son, nephew or younger brother. With the song came laughter and raised voices.

'Lizabeth fumbled around in the light spilling from the taproom. A clinking sound, and two bottles were pressed into my arms. 'Take these upstairs and leave them on the counter,' she said. 'Don't let any of that rabble filch them.'

I ran back up the stairs. I didn't want to be alone in the cellar with 'Lizabeth. My arm still hurt from the last time. I placed the bottles on the bar near the cellar entrance. 'Lizabeth returned with two more clasped in her skinny hands. She found me peering through the Long Room door, which I had prised open a crack.

'Here, you know you're not allowed back in there, not until after breakfast.'

She caught me by my apron string and yanked me out of the way. 'Wait here and mind you don't go peeking again. I'll take these in now and you hand me the other two when I call back for them.'

'Yes, 'Lizabeth.'

The rain returned to drown the remainder of the morning. The rest of my time in the taproom passed by in a cloud of pipe smoke and barter. More dealing was done by traders in roadside houses than in any fashionable London coffee house, I suspected. London gossip was stale by the time it reached my ears, but local news straight off the coach was usually fresh, and merchantmen thought nothing of spilling stories to one another in front of a bar wench.

The call came to rejoin the coach. Most of our customers shambled out good-naturedly. Hannah could cope with the rest. I untied my apron, folded it and stowed it behind one of the ale barrels. The rain had eased into drizzle by the

time I stepped outside, and Judd was checking the harnesses on the new team under Gregor's critical eye.

Matthew was waiting beside the carriage door. We had lost some passengers and gained new ones. The coach would need to be rebalanced if the journey was to be comfortable. A fat vicar had been joined by a weedy banker, and two women – one stout, the other as thin as a pole.

I shut the taproom door. Isaac was standing in the porch with a man in a blue velvet coat. They didn't notice me.

'Your accommodation is scant at best, sir,' Blue-coat was saying, 'and the price of the meal was scandalous. I would never be held to such a ransom on the Great North Road.'

'Then ride to York,' Isaac guffawed, 'and save yourself five shillings.'

'You are mighty impertinent for an innkeeper.'

Isaac's tone sobered at once. 'Green Gallows is mine, as is the land it stands on. This is an inn, not a posting house, with food, beds and horses better than any you'll find at a by-your-leave along the roadside. You are welcome to bring you own sheets if you wish. And while you're about it, you can bring your own brandy, your own supper and a basket of logs for the fire. If you are not satisfied with that, there's another coaching inn at Stonehill, twenty miles up the lykeaway.'

Blue-coat pulled his hat down over his forehead. 'The turnpike will put paid to such extortion.'

Isaac eyes widened ever so slightly. 'The turnpike is a rumour, used to cheapen food and pull down the price of a bed. Go about your business and pray don't detain me any further from mine.'

Blue-coat looked as if he might argue then thought better of it. He strode across the yard to the coach. Isaac turned and caught me watching. 'You mustn't pay heed to stupid tales about a new road,' he said. 'Now get on with your duties, lass.'

Matthew was already loading the carriage. 'I want to sit by the window,' the barrel-bodied clergyman protested as he was guided up the steps. 'Can't abide people's damned knees knock-knocking against my legs all the time.'

'Sit by the window, sir, and you'll end up tumbling out of it, along with your fellow passengers.'

The man regarded him sharply, searching for insolence and finding none in Matthew's genial grin. Spluttering, he squeezed himself between Blue-coat and the banker's ancient, powdered periwig.

'Obliged to you, sir,' Matthew said, tugging his forelock and stepping back so that I could close the carriage door. Satisfied, he gave the nod to Gregor, who clicked the reins and sent the team rumbling out of the yard.

I headed for the stables. No more regular coaches until the afternoon when the Stonehill carriage would be due, but I had to stay nearby in case any private traffic called. At the height of the season, Green Gallows boasted as many as twenty or thirty horses on call, with chaises and single mounts available for rent. There was plenty of casual work to be had for local men most weekends.

I crept into the stable's musty womb. Judd was in the far stall, examining the lame horse and muttering under his breath. I clambered up the ladder into the hayloft. I'd made a bed for myself beside the narrow window with some old, dust-suffocated straw and linen that was too ragged to be used on the beds. It wasn't a window really, just an old hatch once used for chucking out bales. Judd had fixed some scraps of coloured glass bought at the market for tuppence into a crude wooden frame and fitted it into the hole. I was sure the first decent storm would blow it out, but it gave a good view of the stable yard and the gate beyond, painting the world in livid hues of yellow, red and green.

Settling back into the straw, I heard Matthew's lopsided steps as he strolled across the cobbled stable floor, the clunk of a pail, the jingle of a harness.

‘How’s the mare?’

Judd’s voice, edged with frustration. ‘Tell Isaac we’ll have to call the Prestbury smith out again. A new shoe and a couple of nights’ rest will fix this beast, but it was a close thing. If Gregor pushed this another few miles he’d find himself at the side of the lane with a coachload of passengers and a dead wheeler between the shafts.’

A moment’s pause. I could imagine Judd shaking his blond boulder of a head. ‘That man is the finest driver I know but he has the sense of a donkey at times. He should have known better than to push that team. And I never thought I’d find myself sorry that Isaac tossed out Colly Bruce.’

Matthew’s voice. ‘Gregor wants his tips. People have been known to pay extra to be driven by him.’

Judd grunted. ‘I asked Isaac again if we could have our own forge. That old outhouse near the gate is beggin’ to be used.’

‘He won’t do it. Not after Colly.’ His voice took on Isaac’s deep, booming tones. ‘“This is a respectable establishment; I’ll not have tinker trash like you on my land!”’

I giggled into my sleeve. Judd, however, was less than amused. ‘Every time I call the village smith out it costs a ransom. Curtis would save a good few guineas if he swallowed his pride a little. Respectable this place might be but it’s a working inn, not some landowner’s folly. And don’t go making fun of your employer either. One of these days he’ll hear you, my lad, and they’ll be naught I can do to spare you a hiding.’

Feet scuffed on the cobbles. ‘Have you seen Rachel?’

‘Don’t bother her. She’s worked hard this morning.’

They talked some more, about the horses, the morning’s customers, the leaking roof at the far end of the stables. A last flurry of rain pattered against my multicoloured window. Sitting up on my makeshift mattress, I dipped my hand into the special pocket Mother had sewn into the folds of my gown and took out the morning’s haul. Scraping a

clear patch amidst the straw, I spread the coins out on the dusty floorboards. More copper than silver. I struggled to count them. Lucy could have added them up with a quick flick of her fingers, but even working the taproom had done nothing to improve my sluggish head for figures.

Two shillings and eightpence, including the tips from the bar. I slid aside a tarnished sixpence, as much as I dared take, and returned the rest to the safety of my pocket. I shimmied on my knees across to the window, checked that no one was watching from the yard, then fumbled underneath the crude window ledge. There was an inch gap between the wood and the stonework. Risking splinters, I edged my hand along until I found it: a hole between two good-sized blocks, which I had scooped out of the soft mortar with a teaspoon filched from the kitchen. I shoved the sixpence inside and was rewarded with a soft 'chink' as it joined the other coins. Almost nine shillings the last time I had dared count it. My fortune. Mother always took the rest of the tips. She used them to buy hats for Lucy.

Content, I lolled back on the straw for half an hour, watching as the first of the post boys entered the gate and crossed the yard in quick, busy strides. There! Always the snatched glance upward towards Lucy's room as if she would be waiting for them at her window, a flaxen-haired Juliet with a face full of kissing smiles. Even to wink at her took all of their daring. The first one to pinch her rump had found himself in the horse trough with an empty slop bucket over his head. The next one had been taken by Isaac into the stables and shown the axe.

'Touch her again and you know what you'll lose,' he growled. 'My daughter ain't for the likes of you, and if you don't want to spend the rest of your days squawking like a wench you'll tell your friends that too.'

No one had laid a finger on her after that, though they stole glances often enough and scurried to find some business that would take them inside the inn so they could be near her.

I would've exchanged heated kisses with any one of them, either in the hayloft or the musty green space between the nettles and the stable wall. But a man with a thirst for sweet wine has no desire to sup sour milk.

'Go kiss one of your horses,' a lad said, laughing, when I would have made a whore of myself just to feel his leather-chapped hands fumble with my petticoats. Maybe he thought I'd cry. Instead I bit him on the arm. The taste of his flesh, salty with sweat and lightly powdered with dust from the lane, filled my stomach with shivers. He slapped me to the ground and spat in the dirt. A boot in my ribs would have followed had Matthew not got a hold of the lad and sent him packing.

At fifteen, or perhaps sixteen, my body terrified me. It hurt and bled, and peppered my face with grisly red craters. Other times it clawed at my innards with a hunger I didn't know how to satisfy.

Only last week, Judd asked me to bring a pail of water to the stables. For no good reason I burst into tears and fled the yard. My face cried itself pink seemingly of its own will. I found myself snapping at people I liked. To make matters worse, everyone exchanged knowing winks and said something about 'that age'.

And want, want, every waking hour of the day.

Solace in the warm pitch-bucket of my bedchamber. Fumbles in the dark. I felt guilt. Shame.

Alive.

The Stonehill coach rumbled into the yard. Only four passengers inside and six on top. Still good for a couple of shillings if I could charm them enough. Another company worked this route and each day a different driver winked at me from his perch, impressed at my ability to squeeze a tip out of the most lemon-faced passenger. I smiled butterflies, saw my charges off the coach and, with a new team snorting between the shafts, on their way again. Above, the sullen carpet of cloud rolled up and blew itself towards the coast. The coun-

tryside sparkled in the gratitude of the newly released sun.

I spent a couple of hours in the coach house sweeping out one of the two post chaises we kept for hire. Then it was off to the kitchen for bread and a slab of cold mutton pie. Hannah had saved me some bramble tart from lunch and stood by in goggle-eyed wonder as I crammed the lot into my mouth and washed it down with a swig of milk.

‘You’re bursting out of that dress,’ she observed drily. ‘You’ll never have Lucy’s sweet figure if you don’t even let your food touch the plate before scoffing it.’

I stared at my plate, pink rosebuds blooming on my cheeks. The food suddenly felt like rocks in my belly. Hannah looked beyond me to the window.

‘There’s a coach in the yard. Lord preserve us, it’s Sutcliffe. You’d better run, girl.’

I fled the table and stumbled outside. A wooden monstrosity was waiting near the stables. Lord Sutcliffe’s carriage was a patchwork quilt of teak, oak, walnut, mahogany and whatever other woods could be pressed into service. I felt that were I to pull out the proper nail from the proper place, the whole thing would fall open like a box with loose hinges.

His visits were becoming more frequent, and each time he tarried a little longer, claiming the replacement horses were unsuitable or that their harnesses were worn – sending Judd or Matthew back to the stables on one useless errand after another.

‘Hallo there!’ he called over. I closed my eyes and dug deep to find a smile. Working my mouth into happy shapes was a game I played very well.

I halted a respectful distance from the door. Sutcliffe’s withered face peered down at me. Burgundy curtains flapped loosely in a rogue breeze. The door hid him from the neck down.

‘Good afternoon, Lord Sutcliffe,’ I said. ‘You seem in agreeable health today.’

‘Pah, I look like a leper and well you know it. Don’t lie to me, girl, or you’ll feel the hard side of my hand across that mare’s behind of yours.’ He leaned forward. Loose strands of horsehair poked out of his powdered wig, giving his head the appearance of a white pincushion. ‘Or perhaps you’d like that, eh?’

I could feel the blood rushing into my face. Behind my back, my hands curled into fists. I didn’t hear what he said next. A full half-minute passed before I could bring myself to look at him again.

How could anyone be so old and still draw breath? When he moved, his body shuddered the way a tree does on feeling the first bite of the axe. And that carriage must be a hundred years old. Matthew told me it had most likely started life as a simple box thing on wheels. But over the years it had been added to, the way a modest house can sprout granite wings, grand staircases and glass conservatories.

They were well matched, those two. I wondered if he ever stepped outside that tomb on wheels. I wondered if he even had a real body beneath that grizzly, pockmarked chin.

I swallowed. ‘And where is m’lord bound today?’

‘Oh.’ A flick of his lace-cuffed wrist. ‘I am merely riding the lanes, watching the traffic and commerce. It amuses me. This is a busy stretch of road, would you not say?’

‘Aye, m’lord. Fifty coaches a week or more, not counting the farm wagons and gypsy vans.’

He nodded. ‘They tell me it was originally built to take corpses to the parish churchyard.’

‘That is true also.’

‘Do you suppose my peers would prove so eager to travel this route if they knew it once ferried plague victims?’

‘I can’t say. It was a very long time ago.’

‘No, no of course you cannot say. An urchin like you can hardly be expected to know what the gentry do and do not favour.’

The sharp bite of nails into my palms. ‘No, m’lord.’

He perched round spectacles on his nose and peered about the yard. ‘They used to hang criminals here, too.’

‘Aye, that is how Green Gallows got its name. Our inn sign hangs from the old gibbet. There are other things we keep for novelty – a set of stocks, a scold’s bridle. Our visitors find them interesting.’

‘Indeed. And where is your pretty sister today?’

I stared at him for a few seconds before answering. ‘Lucy is indoors. I think she’s practising the spinet.’

‘Tell her that I enquired after her, won’t you, child?’ He flipped a coin out of the window. It landed in the gravel at my feet. A sovereign, a whole sovereign, glittering like dragonfire on the dull ochre chippings.

‘Yes m’lord, I will.’

‘See that you do. Now fetch your father. I would have words with him.’

I ran, because the sooner Sutcliffe’s business was done the sooner he would be off our land. Isaac was at the tradesman’s entrance near the back of the kitchens. He and Mother were checking the bread delivery while the flustered baker looked on. For some weeks there had been a suspicion that he was selling us yesterday’s loaves while the fresh bread went to the kitchens of Marrin’s Hall. Isaac scowled as he sniffed and prodded. When I told him who was waiting he scooped up half a dozen loaves in his big arms and threw them into the dirt.

‘Take your mouldy bread and go,’ he told the baker. ‘Don’t bring your wares within half a league of my inn again.’

‘B . . . Beg your pardon, sir,’ the tradesman stammered, ‘but I am owed for this past week. Most of that bread was straight from my oven, I swear.’

‘You’ll not get a penny from me. Be thankful that I don’t force you to eat your own rotten food.’

The baker rescued his battered loaves and tossed them into the back of his cart. A few tumbled back onto the dirt as he drove off in a flurry of gravel.

‘So,’ Isaac declared, wiping his hands on his breeches. ‘Lord Sutcliffe wants a word, does he?’

‘Why doesn’t he come inside?’ Mother protested. ‘Do our hearth and our wine not suit?’

‘Lord Sutcliffe dines, travels and deals in that carriage. You go to him, or you don’t do business.’

‘And what business could he have with you if it is not our hospitality he wants?’

Isaac stooped and kissed Mother on the cheek. ‘A turn in our fortunes, wife, that’s what I aim to deal in.’

Judd caught me on the way back across the yard. He stood beside me, thumbs hooked into the waistband of his leather breeches.

‘I don’t know why Sutcliffe comes here,’ I said quietly. ‘He’s always trying to find fault with the place. How many times will he make you change the horses today, d’you think?’

Judd squinted into the lowering sun and shrugged. ‘Oh, once or twice. On his last visit we brought the first team he dismissed back out and hitched them again without his noticing. If it were up to me, I’d have given him the same team he drove in with, ’cept that wouldn’t be fair on the horses.’

Any other time I would have laughed but my stomach felt like lead. I shielded my eyes against the light and stared towards Marrin’s Ridge where the treetops bit into the late afternoon sky with rows of jagged, green teeth.

‘He tipped me a sovereign. Why do you suppose an old man like that would give someone like me a sovereign?’

Judd placed a hand on my arm. His fist could break a man’s jaw but it was like a butterfly landing on my sleeve. ‘I wouldn’t like to say, lass. The gentry think money can buy them anything. You should know that, and your sister too. Come on now, we’ve another two stagecoaches coming in before the day is done.’

All that afternoon Isaac remained within the stuffy bowels of Sutcliffe’s ancient carriage. His horses were fed

and watered, his coach axles greased, the harnesses cleaned and oiled. At five o'clock Hannah went out with a tray of bread, fresh thankfully, and a selection of our best cheeses. The burgundy curtains twitched when she tapped on the crested door. It swung open, the tray disappeared. Hannah returned empty handed.

'Could you see inside?' I asked, grabbing her as she tried to swill out some tankards in the taproom. 'Does Sutcliffe have no legs as some say?'

She shook free of my grasp. 'Couldn't rightly tell. 'Twas dark and hot, and thick with cigar smoke. A wonder either of them could breathe.'

Around eight o'clock, Isaac climbed out of Sutcliffe's carriage and trudged across the yard. Perspiration slicked his hair and spread dark patches across his shirt. His clothes hung in loose folds as if he had shrunk. Odours clung to him. Spilled wine, stale tobacco. I ached to know what had happened.

'Go tell Judd to hitch Lord Sutcliffe's team,' Isaac ordered me, jerking a thumb towards the stables. 'If you see Hannah, tell her to bring a pail of water upstairs.' He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. 'I need to wash.'

The rest of the evening dragged by. I crawled into my bedchamber, sick with exhaustion, as the last light was leaking out of the sky. I didn't bother to light a candle. Instead I sat on my bed, opposite the cold hearth, and nudged off my shoes. My feet sighed with relief. After a few moments I flicked my tricorne onto the bedpost and padded over to the dresser to pour cold water into the basin. I washed my face of all the muck that I'd picked up in my workings between yard, kitchen and taproom. I scrubbed my hands, crone's hands, all calluses and broken fingernails. I couldn't imagine Lucy having hands like these.

I towelled myself and slipped still-aching feet into my old slippers. My belly wanted supper and wasn't going to let me sleep until it was fed. I shuffled down the hall past the

Long Room. Muted conversation and a ripple of laughter came from behind the door. Guests would be smoking, drinking or playing cards. Sometimes, if the inn was full, Isaac hired a quintet and there was dancing until two or three o'clock in the morning. Hannah was most likely in there now, bringing up fresh bottles of port from the cellar or serving pipe fills from the tobacco box. If someone wanted food she would have to open up the kitchen and prepare it herself, Sally having long retired for the night.

A small chamber off the passage served as our family room. Mother was seated by the fire, her back to me, sewing needle glinting in the orange firelight as it dipped in and out of her embroidery. Lucy sat opposite in a tall leather armchair, a book open in her lap. She looked up as I entered and tipped me a very unladylike wink.

'You're late,' Mother said, eyeing me over the top of her sampler.

'Judd asked me to help with the horses,' I replied. 'He had trouble unhitching the team from the Prestbury stage. One of the harnesses got caught and needed to be cut free. The animal grew skittish and had to be coaxed into the stables.'

'Your father tells you what jobs to do and when to do them, not Judd.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'How much did you get today?'

I dipped into my dress pouch and scattered coins across the table top. Mother put down her sewing and pattered over to the table in short, quick steps, like a hen scratching across a farmyard. 'Is this the lot? From the taproom too?'

'Yes.'

'Mmmm. It will buy a new hairbrush for Lucy.'

'It's mine,' I said, almost in a whisper. 'I earned it.'

'Hoarding money is wrong. Your work pays for your keep. We all have jobs to do, Lucy more than most. Now eat your broth.'

She scooped the coins into her apron and shoved a

wooden bowl across the table. Steaming liquid slopped onto the chipped surface. Lucy kept her eyes on her book. A flush had crept into her cheeks.

I ate supper in silence. Vegetable broth was followed by boiled potatoes and a slice of cold beef. I was too hungry to care what I shoved into my mouth. Isaac appeared, bathed and wearing a change of clothes. He dropped a sheaf of papers onto the table. Excitement glimmered in his dark eyes.

‘I am expanding Green Gallows,’ he declared. ‘Bigger stables, more horses and hire carriages, new rooms indoors to accommodate more guests. The kitchen and taproom will have to be extended and extra staff hired to cope. Stableboys, ostlers, chambermaids – even bar wenches to serve ale. We need them all.’

We stared at him. ‘Better use will have to be made of our outbuildings,’ he continued. ‘Perhaps we can turn them into servants’ quarters to free up space in here. That shed behind the tack room hasn’t seen decent work since I was a lad.’

‘Whose scheme was this?’ Mother said, dropping her sampler.

‘Lord Sutcliffe has a friend in London, a Lord Grays, who is keen to invest money in coaching properties. Bait has also been cast for one or two other investors to nibble. He’s confident we’ll hook a sizeable catch.’

‘And what is your share in these grand designs? How are you to pay for your slice in this rich new pie?’

‘Lord Grays is willing to advance a handsome sum, interest free for the first year. Lord Sutcliffe has vouched for me and his word is good in any part of the city.’

‘Not without security he won’t, so don’t try to fudge my head with talk of good names. These men are not your friends. My cousin was a banker and wouldn’t risk a penny against a pot of gold without bricks or stock to back it up. A loan is what you are speaking of, Isaac Curtis. You have nothing to your name except Green Gallows, so I daresay it is Green Gallows you are willing to sign away.’

Isaac shrugged. 'Hardly a risk. Lord Grays is a respected man of business and must follow the rules of his trade. He'd be obliged to ask for security against tomorrow's sunrise if it came to it.'

'Take care, husband, that your ambitions don't lose us our home as well as our livelihood.'

'You have ambitions too, Harriet. You've always hankered after a place in society even if you believe society is undeserving of you. If you want to sup off silver and ride around in a landau then save your mockery for those women who will one day be beneath you. We have to work towards prosperity and sometimes that means taking risks. A thriving business will also better Lucy's chances of catching the right husband.'

'Your head is as empty as your pocket. Ashes, that's all your hopes will turn into. You will sweat and bleed and spend, and have nothing to show for it but empty stables and empty beds.'

'This will be the best coaching inn between London and the coast. Expansion will improve our trade – bring us the custom we deserve. The London *Charger* will stop here. I swore to my father that I'd see the day when it would, and it'll be my doing. Mine. Why don't you believe in me, Harriet? It's what you wanted, ain't it?'

'Ain't it.' Mother shook her head. 'Listen to you. A glint of gold and you're talking like a ploughboy. We could give up our beds, empty our cellar, pave our stable yard with silver shillings and the *Charger* would still throw mud in your face. A highwayman couldn't stop that coach. The last one who tried got a belly full of shot and a rope around his neck at Tyburn.'

'Face the truth, Harriet. This proves that the turnpike was just a rumour. I've been talking to Gregor and he agrees. The South Road has always been at the heart of travel in this county.'

'Gregor will say anything to please you if he thinks there is a free tankard of ale at the end of it.'

‘I give the drivers free food and ale to encourage them to stop their coaches here. The practice is well known.’

‘And how do you know they wouldn’t stop anyway?’

They talked like this for a while longer. Lucy seemed to be trying to push herself into the back of her armchair. I prodded the last of my supper around the plate. This was not like their other arguments where Isaac always told Mother to go and boil herself, then gave in and did just what she wanted. I was reminded of a brittle old oak standing in a gale which, unable to bend, eventually snapped.

‘Green Gallows will grow,’ he said. ‘We can either grow prosperous with it or wither away like unwatered weeds. You can’t win a shilling without first gambling a penny.’

‘Even if it is our last penny?’

Isaac put his hand on Mother’s shoulder. ‘It won’t come to that. You’ll see.’