Nobody's Child

Valerie Wood

Published by Corgi

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

CHAPTER ONE

1880

Laura stood by the edge of the saltmarsh, gazing over the Humber estuary. She kept very still so as not to disturb the hundreds of wading birds – curlew, shelduck, redshank and oystercatcher – that were probing the mudflats for shrimps, lugworms and sea snails. It was just after midday and the sun glinted sharply on the wet surface of the estuarine silt. Was this the spot where her mother had stood debating her future? Had her grandmother come here to contemplate hers? She looked back over her shoulder. The carriage that had brought her was a good distance away, and beside it her brother, in a caped coat, top hat and warm scarf, was pacing impatiently.

Her feet were cold and wet and she glanced down, ruefully regretting that she hadn't thought to wear more sensible boots than these highly

polished ones. Her eyes wandered over the spread of the saltmarsh and were caught by the different species of plants. Some look like Michaelmas daisies, she thought; perhaps they're sea asters. She narrowed her eyes and noticed other plants and fine-leaf grasses. Pink thrift, blue couch grasses, and sea lavender. Some of them were growing in the deep channels and runnels which were filling rapidly as the tide turned, flooding the low-lying marsh. Mother would know what they are, she mused. She was a country girl.

'Laura!' James's voice broke into her meditation. The wind was blowing towards him, off the estuary, carrying the sound away, back towards the village of Welwick, yet it was loud enough to startle the feeding birds, causing them to rise up in a soaring feathered flight to freedom. 'Come on! It's freezing out here and the tide is turning.'

She shivered, the coldness of the wind and his words biting into her. So it was.

'I don't know what on earth you are doing, Laura,' her brother grumbled as she returned. 'What a godforsaken place this is!' She lifted the hem of her wool coat as he helped her into the curricle before seating himself beside her, taking the reins and cracking his whip to urge the roan-coloured pair back towards the village. 'I'm thankful you asked me to drive you and not

Stubbs. He'd have thought you mad, wanting to come out here!'

Not mad but curious, she thought as they drove down the rutted track. She glanced curiously at the village homesteads they passed. Did Mama once live in one of these cottages? She would never say, only that she had been born somewhere round here, and that she knew nothing of her own mother except her name. Mary-Ellen.

'Why do you want to know about the past anyway?' James continued brusquely. 'We know who we are. Mother lived here only briefly. She was widowed when Father died at sea. What more is there to know? Leave it at that!'

I can't, she thought as they drove through the village of Patrington and onto the turnpike road towards the ancient town of Hedon. I have to know. I need to know who I am and where I came from.

Their mother, Susannah, had always been reserved and unwilling to speak of her background. She said she hadn't known her mother or father, only Great-aunt Lol, who had brought her up, Aunt Jane, and Jane's husband Wilfred Topham. Of him she said little.

'And what of our papa?' Laura had asked when she was a child. 'I don't remember him at all and neither does James. I wish that I did.'

He was dead, her mother had told her flatly,

he had died not long after Laura was born, and she had to be satisfied with that, though she had the vague feeling that her mother was being evasive and not telling the whole truth. However, she would not be drawn further.

Her mother was still fair and comely, her hair thick and honey-coloured as James's was, her eyes wide and blue; but she was quiet and self-contained, unlike James who oozed confidence and authority, and totally unlike Laura herself, who was above average height, with a mass of unruly dark hair, and invariably spoke her mind without thinking first. But that, Laura mused, as they rattled on towards Hedon where they were to spend the night, is because Mama has given us the confidence to think for ourselves. She's worked to give us a secure background, to be beholden to no-one.

The Fleet Inn where they were staying was on the outskirts of the medieval town of Hedon. An age-old hostelry, it had been built to serve farm labourers, annual harvesters and seamen using the ancient waterways of the town, and was, in the late 1850s, on the point of collapse, until a new owner had come along and bought it, renewed the stables in the yard, put on a new frontage and rearranged the interior to give a public bar, several small rooms, and bedrooms to accommodate visitors. There were frequent walkers in the area who liked to tramp the

country roads on their way to Spurn Point, the headland which stretched betwixt the Humber estuary and the sea, or follow the havenside path to the riverside village of Paull.

Their mother Susannah was the leaseholder of the inn and had been for over twenty years, sub-letting it to a succession of licensees. She was also the owner of an inn in Beverley, two shops in Hull and her own house in the village of Hessle where the three of them lived. How she had achieved this when she was a widow, her son and daughter didn't know, for in answer to their questioning she would simply tap the side of her nose and say 'survival instinct'. They agreed to humour her and together privately agreed that their late father must have left her a considerable amount of money which she had invested wisely, for that she was an astute and shrewd woman they had no doubt.

Up in the bedroom which was kept for her mother when she visited, Laura washed her hands and face, tidied her hair and pinned on a white lace cap. She had already changed her wet boots for a pair of indoor slippers, so when James knocked on the door to tell her he was ready to escort her downstairs for the chop supper they had ordered she did not keep him waiting. She was pleased that their mother had suggested they stayed the night here, for she was quite tired and would not have relished a further journey into

Hull and then out again to Hessle on the western side of the town.

The stairs led down into the front entrance of the inn and they could hear the rumble of male voices in the public bar. 'We're in here, I think,' James began, indicating a half-open door through which Laura saw a table set for supper. There was a sudden gust of wind as the front door opened and the man coming in grabbed it to stop it crashing against the wall.

'I beg your pardon,' he said to Laura, taking off his hat. 'I didn't mean to startle you.'

Laura smiled and nodded at the stranger. 'There's quite a breeze getting up,' she answered.

'Ellis? Edmund Ellis? Is it you?' James stared at the man, who was taller by a head than he was.

'It is!' A small frown appeared above the man's nose. 'And you are?'

'Page. James Page! Perhaps you won't remember me? I was in the year below you at Pocklington school.'

'Great heavens! So you were!' Edmund Ellis extended his hand. 'What are you doing out here?'

'Oh, er – just visiting the area. My sister was keen to see Holderness. May I introduce – Laura, this is Edmund Ellis. Ellis – my sister Laura Page.'

Edmund Ellis gazed openly at Laura and gave

a bow. She inclined her head and dipped her knee. Then, unconventionally, she put out her hand. 'How do you do?'

He raised his eyebrows as he took it. 'I'm well, thank you!' He smiled and she saw admiration in his eyes, which did not daunt her in the least. She was used to such glances for her boldness as much as for her beauty.

'You and James were at school together, Mr Ellis? I don't recall James mentioning your name,' she said.

'Our paths didn't cross all that much,' Edmund Ellis replied, 'and I left when I was sixteen to help my grandfather on the estate. Are you staying here?'

'Yes. We're just going in for supper,' James said. 'Perhaps you'd like to join us?' He turned to Laura for her approval and her heart sank. She really didn't want to hear endless tales of schoolboy pranks or reminiscences.

'I'm afraid I can't,' Ellis said. 'I'm on my way home, but if I might join you for a glass of ale before you eat?' He too glanced at Laura for her consent, which she gave. I suppose a short conversation might be interesting, she considered, for he was a personable-looking man, with thick fair hair and very searching blue eyes. He was dressed in country tweeds and cord breeches with long leather boots.

He was also very confident and self-assured,

she decided as she listened to them talking. Rather like James, so perhaps boarding school instils those traits into schoolboys. Perhaps it's a veneer they cultivate to prove they are superior. He stayed chatting and drinking his ale, and in the short time he was with them they learned that both his father and his mother were dead, and that he and his grandfather ran the considerable family estate in Skeffling. He'd grinned. 'He likes to keep an eye on me – hold the reins, you know!'

James had, at Ellis's questioning, told him of his business interests, banking and property, and where they lived.

'Hessle!' Ellis had exclaimed. 'You're a long way from home! I've never been. Quite civilized out there, so I believe?' He'd grinned and looked at Laura. 'Come to look at the country folk, have you?'

She was saved from answering by the arrival of supper and he took his leave of them, which was just as well, she thought, as she wasn't sure whether she would have told him why they were here: that she was in search of her roots, and that her mother had at last decided to humour her and talk a little of her own childhood in isolated Holderness.

'As I've said before, I can tell you nothing about your grandparents,' her mother had said, and her eyes were wistful. 'When I questioned

Aunt Jane, who was my mother's cousin, or her mother, my great-aunt Lol, about whose child I was, they simply said—' She'd swallowed hard and her eyes had filled with tears as she whispered, 'Nobody's. You are nobody's child.'

CHAPTER TWO

1837

'Mary-Ellen! Mary-Ellen! Where are you?' Jane called, looking first in the falling-down cow shelter, and then behind the dilapidated hen house. 'Where are you?'

A figure in the distance coming across the marshy grassland from the estuary waved to her and called back. She had a bundle under one arm and was carrying a metal pail. She looks like a gypsy with that wild black hair blowing round her face, Jane thought as she walked towards her, and she's barefoot! She isn't even wearing boots!

Since they were children, Jane had been in awe of her cousin. Mary-Ellen had been feisty, daring and mischievous and often even scary to quiet mouse-like Jane who was urged to do things she wouldn't have dreamed of doing on her own, such as jumping over the wide dykes and ditches which were scattered over the Holderness fields

and marshes to drain the surplus water off the land and back into the Humber.

Sometimes they would clamber onto the barges moored off the banks of the estuary. 'We'll fall in,' a nervous Jane would cry. 'I don't want to.' But she would be urged on and she didn't drown, as she feared she might, not with Mary-Ellen there to look after her, and she had always felt a sense of triumph and achievement as they ran home for their supper, Jane to the village of Welwick and Mary-Ellen a mile further along the estuary bank to her isolated home at Welwick Thorpe.

'Look.' Mary-Ellen raised the pail. 'Elvers and shrimps for supper.' She held up a wet greeny-coloured bundle. 'And samphire. Food for free! And I've set another trap for rabbits. There's dozens about.'

Jane wrinkled her nose. Though she knew how to skin a rabbit, she hated to do it or see them caught in a trap. 'I've come to tell you summat,' she said, as they turned and walked back to the cottage where Mary-Ellen lived with her widowed father. 'I've got a job! A proper job o' work.'

Mary-Ellen put down the pail and brushed her hair away from her forehead, leaving a muddy streak. 'Where? Who'd have a scrap like you?'

She grinned as she asked and it wasn't meant unkindly, for Jane was small in height, and as thin as if she'd never had a decent meal in her

life. In this isolated rural area of Holderness close by the river, they all ate whatever they could grow or catch: potato soup, fish stew or rabbit. Some, like Mary-Ellen, thrived on it; at seventeen she was tall and had the rounded curves and breasts of womanhood, whereas Jane was childlike in appearance.

'I've been took on at Ellis's farm at Skeffling. I'm to help with 'washing and to do 'rough.'

'To do 'rough?' Mary-Ellen laughed. 'You'll not last five minutes! Why you? You've allus stopped at home and helped your ma.'

'I know.' Jane was rueful. 'But Maggie's getting wed soon and will move away, so we won't have her wages, and Ma says I should start work now that I'm thirteen. Our Sally's old enough to help her in 'house and with 'bairns. I don't want to go,' she added.

'You'll be all right, Janey.' Mary-Ellen put her arm round her cousin's shoulder. 'Who got you 'job then? Mr Bennett?'

Mr Bennett was the agent who collected rents from the smallholders, tenant farmers and cottagers on behalf of the various landowners.

'Yes,' Jane replied. 'Ma had asked him during 'summer if he'd put in a word for me at some of 'big houses, cos I was honest and willing 'n' that. And he came round 'other day and said he'd heard that Ellis's cook was wanting somebody, and she didn't want to ask at 'workhouse like last

time. She said that 'young lasses from there didn't know one end of a broom handle from t'other. I'm to start at Martinmas,' she added.

'I'll miss you, Janey,' Mary-Ellen said. 'Who'll I talk to when you're gone?'

Jane shrugged. 'Onny my ma,' she said. 'She likes you to come. She still misses your ma, I think.'

Mary-Ellen nodded. Aunt Lol was her mother's sister and had been a surrogate mother to Mary-Ellen after her mother died until she was old enough to look after herself and her father Isaac. Isaac Page, however, was extremely demanding and grumbled if she spent time away from their homestead. 'Lol has plenty of her own kin to blether to. She doesn't need you,' he would say, if ever Mary-Ellen went to visit. 'And you've plenty to occupy you here without gallivanting over to Welwick.' He had never really got on with Aunt Lol, probably because she had a sharp tongue and he had felt its lash from time to time.

A rough, hard-working labouring man, he had felt his wife's loss keenly. He hadn't wanted much, he ruminated into his ale. He liked his food on the table, a good fire in the hearth and a warm bed. Mary-Ellen kept hens, milked the cow, grew vegetables, and washed and cooked for him. For his bed she provided a hot brick wrapped in a piece of flannel, though there were some nights when he stayed overlong at the

hostelry in Welwick, drowning his sorrows and occasionally taking comfort from an obliging female.

'November?' Mary-Ellen said now. 'Well, you'll be well settled in before winter comes. You'll be in a warm kitchen; they'll have fires in every room, I should think—'

'Aye, and I'll have to clean 'em,' Jane interrupted.

'But you hate 'winter! You're allus complaining about being cold. And you'll get fattened up with all that good meat that 'toffs eat.'

'But I won't know anybody, Mary-Ellen, and nobody'll talk to me.'

'Well, you don't know anybody round here! And who is there to talk to 'cept me and a few other bairns?' Mary-Ellen patted her on the shoulder. 'It'll be a new life for you, Jane, just you see.'

Do I wish it were me? she wondered later as she filled another pail from the pump. She scooped up the pale gritty shrimps, put them into the fresh water and began to clean them. I could wish I was going from this drudgery, though I wouldn't want to work in the big houses and be at the beck and call of anybody. But it would never happen. Her father wouldn't allow it. He agreed that she could go into the fields at harvest time, but vowed that she'd never go into service, nor work in any of the inns or hostelries.

She must keep house for him. But she also knew that no-one would employ her. She was known to be wild, with a sharp tongue and a will and spirit that couldn't be tamed. The only one who held any sway over her was her father, and he did that with the back of his hand and on occasions with his belt as if she was the son he had never had.

Yet Mary-Ellen was generous of spirit and could be kind and loving, as she was with Jane, of whom she was fiercely protective. Jane was invincible when Mary-Ellen was there. No lad or teasing lass would torment Jane if they thought that her cousin would find out.

Isaac Page came home in the late afternoon. A square-set, heavy man, he worked the farms when they needed him for spring sowing or autumn harvesting; he could dig a ditch and turn a furrow, or fish with the boatmen of Patrington Haven or at the riverside village of Paull. He boasted that he could turn his hand to anything, and he did. He had never refused an offer of work.

Mary-Ellen could smell ale on him as he came into the one-roomed dwelling, but he wasn't drunk, and he sniffed appreciatively. 'Fish pie?' he asked.

'Eel pie,' she said, 'and shrimps! I've been down to 'river, and on 'way back I found some elvers buried in the mud.'

He nodded. 'Was 'tide in? Did you tek 'boat out?'

'No. I thought I might catch flounder, but 'tide was running too fast for me to go out, so I just dipped my net and found a few shrimps. It would have been a poor supper if I hadn't found these elvers.' She'd made a substantial meal, chopping off the heads of the little eels, and then cutting them into small pieces before putting them into a pie dish with onions and potatoes. She covered the mixture with a thick flour and water paste and cooked it in the brick oven at the side of the fire. She'd rinsed the samphire to remove the salt and then heated it over the flame, in a pan with a drop of water and a knob of dripping.

Her father had built the brick oven and fireplace for her mother when he had first brought her here, before Mary-Ellen was born. It was heated by wood, so they wasted nothing. Every twig or fallen branch was kept for fuel, both to keep them warm and for cooking. Sometimes a log or spar was washed up on the estuarine marsh and she would drag it home triumphantly, leaving it to dry in the lee of the cow shelter, ready for use on the winter days when they couldn't go out. The weather could be cruel here in the depths of winter, when the flat marshy land was covered in snow, and there were no indications of hidden drains or ditches.

They scraped up the few fallen leaves in the

autumn, for this was almost a treeless countryside, and piled them in the hen house, leaving them until they settled to a thick matted texture, when a handful would be put on the fire overnight to give a slow burn. Then in the spring they dug the rotted mulch into the area where Mary-Ellen grew potatoes, leeks, onions and carrots.

'You're a good lass,' her father admitted, as he tucked into the pie. 'But you must tek care if you go out on 'river. How would I manage if owt happened to you?'

She reflected that he would only miss her for her skills at keeping him fed and warm. Is that all women are useful for? Is that why he married my mother? Was he attracted to her when he met her? She was pretty, I remember, more comely than Aunt Lol; at least she was before she became ill. Her mother had been dragged down by repeated miscarriages. Mary-Ellen, the eldest and sole surviving offspring, had only memories of her mother constantly carrying a child and then losing it.

That's not what I want, she thought, clearing away the dishes and putting them into a tin bowl to wash later. Then she set the kettle over the fire to make a hot drink. I don't want to be constantly having babies. One would be all right, or maybe two, but no more than that. You're for ever poor when there's a lot of bairns. Look at Aunt Lol and Uncle Ben and their brood. She gave a deep

sigh. But how to stop them from coming, that's the problem. You can keep a cock away from the hens and a ram away from the ewes, but how do you keep a husband out of your bed?

'Mary-Ellen!' Her father's voice broke into her thoughts. 'Tha's lookin' dowly. What 'you pondering on?'

She shrugged. 'Nowt much,' she said, knowing the subject wasn't one to share with her father. 'Just this and that.'

He screwed up one eye and gazed at her with the other, a habit he had if he was concentrating. 'Fed up with your lot, are you?' he asked perceptively. 'Wishing for summat more?'

'Don't know what more there is,' she muttered. 'I haven't seen owt for me to wish for. Our Janey's going into service at Martinmas, at one of 'Skeffling farms,' she added.

'Janey who?' he grunted.

Irritated, she raised her eyebrows. 'Aunt Lol's Jane,' she said testily. *You* know!'

'How am I expected to keep track of all them bairns?' he answered sharply. 'Is she 'skinny lass that's allus coming here? She's got nowt on her. How is it they've tekken her?'

'Cos she's honest and willing, I think,' Mary-Ellen said, 'and their cook needs somebody.'

He humphed, muttering something about gentry and their servants. 'Is that what you want to do?' he asked abruptly. 'Cos if it is, you can

forget it! Don't get any fancy ideas. You're wanted here!'

'I didn't say I wanted to go into service,' she said sullenly. 'But I never see anybody from one day to 'next. I've nobody to talk to, Da, not till you come home, and then you're either off out or you fall asleep in front of 'fire.'

'Talk to?' he barked. 'I've telled you afore, there's plenty for you to do without spending your time gossiping.' This time he narrowed both eyes. 'Or are you talking about meeting lads?' He pointed a threatening finger. 'Cos I'll not have that! I'll tek 'strap to you first, aye, and them as well.'

She curled a disdainful lip. The village lads from Welwick or Weeton who came larking down to the river held no attraction for her, though they called jokingly to her or showed off in front of her. 'I'm talking about conversation, Da! Somebody to discuss things with.'

'Discuss? What's to discuss apart from 'weather and where 'next meal is coming from?' He chewed on his lip as he deliberated and stretched his legs up onto the hearth. 'When 'time comes – when I can't work any more – then I'll look round for some likely fella for you to marry and he can come here and keep us both.'

She tossed her head. 'I'll be too old then! You forget I'm seventeen! And if I wanted to marry – which I don't – then I'd choose for myself, thank

you! And besides,' she added, 'I don't know who you think'd want to come and live here in this rat hole.' She flinched as she spoke and dodged the slap which she had known would come.

'Just watch your mouth, lass,' he threatened, standing up, and picking up his jacket to go out. 'I'll not stand for it.'

'And what'll you do if I decide to leave?' she taunted, unable to leave well alone. 'You just asked how you'd manage if I drowned in 'river!'

'I'd find some poor wench down on her luck.' He pulled on his hat. He glanced at her as he spoke and their eyes met. He grinned and so did she.

'She'd have to be at 'bottom of 'barrel to come out here,' she shouted after him as he went out of the door. 'Really hard pinched. With no hope at all!'

They'd both backed away from confrontation, but it was an argument that raised its head time and again.

Mary-Ellen made a pot of tea and, cradling a cup in her hand, stood in the open doorway looking out. Nightfall was slow in descending on this flat hummocky plain but an orange incandescent sun was sinking towards the horizon and the vast sky was brushed with a rich palette of colours: deep purple, ruby red, saffron yellow and hues of apricot, aquamarine and rose. The few trees in the landscape, ash and sycamore,

were etched black against the sky. In the distance was the spire of St Patrick's church in Patrington, and beyond that the church steeple in Ottringham village. She took a deep breath and drew in the salty aroma of the estuary, the gathered corn and turned brown earth, the smoke of burning fires. September was a notable time, particularly if there had been a good harvest. It saw the culmination of hard work well done, when the winter corn was gathered in, and pigs, sheep and cattle put to graze on chopped turnips and garnered stubble.

I wouldn't want to leave here, she thought. This is my home. My own place. I'm at one with the landscape and the river. But I could wish for more company, for something exciting to happen in my life, for I have this urge that there should be something more than I have now. She felt a quickening sensation of wanting to run like the hares, to fly like the birds which soared above her as they flew to and from their feeding grounds.

She shrugged into herself, a shadow flitting over her. Life is passing me by. She watched the inky darkness fall, fading out the colour and leaving only blackness and silence pressing in on her.