CHAPTER 1

An early morning summer sky, bright blue and crystal clear, is a wondrous sight to see! A celestial expanse so far and so wide, and up in which the sun, a blazing beacon be, signals its journey from east to west, for to spread its light and warmth upon all that dwells below; flora and fauna, and mankind alike. Beautiful! Amazing! Magnificent!

But as the day marches on, a strengthening breeze arises, white clouds do then appear, and sail across the bright blue, and crystal clear. Whilst upon the horizon, ominous and brooding, darker grey are following on; rain is on its way, I fear.

And far below, upon a dusty track that passes for a country lane and not seen rain in many a week, that strengthening breeze picks up that dust, to blow it back and forth; hither and thither, hither and thither. The hedgerow, too, feels its caress; Hawthorn, Dog Rose and bramble. And whilst their blossoms are long gone, and nesting birds have fledged, tis now their berries that ripen in the summer sun. And beneath that hedge, a verge of yellow and white does run, dandelions and daisies in abundance there are, and upon which the butterflies and bees do alight. And in that breeze, they too do sway, side to side and back and forth, to gently wave hello. And standing tall, firm and straight, is the ancient oak. A silent sentinel. Its leaves gently rustle as the breeze blows through, though some do fall and land upon the pond that lies below, to spin and twirl, and around they go.

Mother Earth's tapestry and larder. Beauty and life. All living in harmony.

And in the distance, upon that breeze, and upon that dusty track that passes for a country lane, the clip-clop sound of hooves can be heard; clippety-clop, clippety-clop. Their pace, measured and steady, yet tired and weary, cart wheels following on; made from wood and rimmed with iron, turning, turning, rolling, rolling; rumbling along.

Tis the late nineteenth century. The exact year? I cannot be sure lest someone were to say. For so many years hath passed. But tis towards August's end, of that I can be sure, for out in the surrounding fields the harvesting of wheat is almost o'er, and so to leave a patchwork quilt of arable progress in its stead: short spikes of pale stubble in hard baked earth; grain-stalk stooks, stacked as far as the eye can see; ploughed fields of dark, rich soil; barley with ripe whiskered ears, yet to harvest in the following month. And as the breeze passes o'er those fields of barley to maketh a shimmering carpet of gold, along with it comes the fresh, earthy smell of those newly ploughed fields; the cries of gulls, fighting o'er earthworms and grubs; the warm, sweet smell of harvested wheat.

August has been a hot, dry month, perfect for the ripening and harvesting of crops. But alas, the skies are now darker still, with black clouds rolling in and the strengthening breeze beginning to blow.

The clip-clop sound is louder, closer, and a horse is now in sight, pulling a dray upon which two people sit, a man and a woman. This dray is of the like, with no sides or seats, leaving the driver and passenger to sit upon its front edge, their legs dangling below as they travel. A flatbed cart, if you will, designed for heavy work rather than comfort. And indeed, this dray is stacked mightily high with furniture, mattress and bedding, pots and pans, along with various farming tools, such as hoe, scythe, and wooden plough. Whilst balanced upon top is a cage of hens, tightly secured with thick, coarse rope. A Shire horse pulls the dray, a big dapple-grey, with white mane and tail; a handsome beast, I ne'er did see.

'Whoa, there, boy!' calls the man, pulling upon the reins to bring the heavily laden dray slowly to a halt.

'Is this it, Eliza?' the man asks of his female companion, turning to look, his accent the rural burr of Norfolk. 'Is this the farmhouse, do you think?'

'Could be, George. Could be,' is Eliza's reply with an Irish lilt of her own. 'Not got a name on it, though.'

'Don't look much,' George says unto her. 'Looks small and a bit run down.'

'The front garden looks beautiful, though. Full of life, so it is. Look at all those bees and butterflies, George!'

'Don't look like it's been lived in for a while, either. In fact, it don't look anything like what the letter said.'

What lies afore George and Eliza and set well back from the lane, is a small farmhouse with an upstairs and downstairs, and built from the stone of lime. Though sadly, I'm sorry to say, its walls are no longer pale and yellow, but are weathered and worn, and with patches of lichen and moss upon them, for the gutters are missing or broken, and from which rainwater has flowed for many a year. The roof of the house is one of slate, and a good few of which are missing; it has two chimney stacks at either end, from which self-seeded weeds do sprout. To the front of the house is a small, open porch with a roof of slate, and within is a worn, weathered timber door. As too, are the four wooden windows, all naked and bare, the paint having long since flaked off. At the back of the house is a lean-to building of one storey high, within which the wash-house and toilet are to be found; it too is much unloved. Across a dirt farmyard and part of the rear boundary is a long barn, also built from the stone of lime and also dark-stained, covered in lichen, with its slate roof sagging in the centre. One-third of the barn has two stables with cracked, weather-beaten doors; the remainder has a large, open-arched doorway and is used for storage, with a hayloft up within its eaves. A crumbling drystone wall surrounds the rest of the farm, and at the front of the property are two gates. The smaller, its timber in poor repair, invites thou up a worn stone-flagged path, past the oak tree and a small duck pond, across what once was lawn but now o'ergrown with dandelions and daisies, to the open porch. The larger gate to the right is a five-bar timber gate that hangs upon one hinge and

is open, leading up an earthen track rutted from years of passage to a second five-bar timber gate and to the yard at the rear; it, too, is open.

This is Oak Tree Farm. A smallholding, really, and upon what the villagers hath always referred to as Church Lane, which is upon the edge of a small village called Marshsted within the county of Lincolnshire and land upon which a farmhouse has stood for many, many a year. Though not, it has to be said, as many as the oak tree, which, according to village folklore, is as old as the medieval church at the top of the lane.

A large cloud drifts across the sun, creating a shadow that passes o'er the house, dark and brooding. Eliza shivers, as if cold, then glances around. 'Well, there's the oak tree and the pond, like the man in the village said. And there's the old church,' she declares, pointing, and in answer to George's question.

'Hello!' comes a voice.

George and Eliza both turn to see a man walking towards them from the direction of the farmyard. A man not long out of his teenage years, tall and broad in the shoulders, yet still slim in body and face from youth, and with fair hair and blue eyes, close to a large hooked nose. His attire consists of a three-piece tweed suit, a dark frock coat, a starched white cotton shirt with a necktie, highly polished leather boots, and a short top hat. This is James Blackwood, the land agent and son of William Blackwood, the landowner and lord of the manor. A young man, it can indeed be said, of bearing and a privileged background.

'Mr and Mrs Turner?' he calls out, in that well-spoken way and manner of those of the upper class.

George glances at Eliza. 'Landlord, presumably,' she replies to his frown.

George nods. 'Ain't sure I likes the look of him. Looks no more than a boy,' he mutters.

Eliza jabs him in the ribs with her elbow. 'Mind your Ps and Qs, George, this is a new start for us, so don't go and bollocks it up!' she tells him under her breath and in no uncertain terms, only to then smile and give James Blackwood a cheery wave. 'And don't you go mentioning we're not married, either. You know how judgmental these upper-class types can be.'

George merely grunts in reply.

'Bring the dray into the yard!' James Blackwood calls again. 'We don't want you blocking the lane to the church, otherwise I'll have the vicar complaining!'

'Walk-on,' says George, unto the horse, pulling upon one rein to turn it and dray through the open gate, its wheels following the rutted track, past the house, through the second gate and into the yard at the rear.

Easing himself down from his seat, George briefly stretches his aching body, then tethers the horse to a rusted ring fixed in the wall of the barn. Tethered close by, in the open arched doorway, is James Blackwood's saddled horse.

Unlike James Blackwood, George is aught but young, tall and slim. Indeed, he appears to be a man of o'er thirty years, average in height, stocky in build and a little girth around the waist with the onset of middle age. And judging by his clothing of dark trousers held up by a thick leather belt, a white open-necked linen shirt o'er which is a dark waistcoat, and with heavy leather hobnail boots upon his feet that are covered with a fine layer of road dust from his journey, he is a man used to manual labour. The cloth cap he wears upon his head, he removes to reveal short, dark hair, thinning upon the top. His face is open and honest, and brown and weathered from outdoor toil, whilst his eyes are a deep brown and a little wary, as he approaches the tall, aristocratic James Blackwood, his cap clenched deferentially in both hands, his legs still a little stiff from his travels.

'Afternoon, sir,' says George, in greeting.

'Good afternoon, Mr Turner,' replies a smiling James Blackwood. 'It's George, isn't it?' he then asks, extending a soft, manicured hand.

'Aye, sir,' George answers as he extends his own, calloused and hard, for the two men to then shake.

'James Blackwood!' he announces to George. 'How was your journey? Travelled from North Norfolk, I believe?'

'Wasn't too bad, sir. Took a couple of days, so stayed a night at a coaching inn. Not the most comfortable journey, but least the weather held off,' is George's reply, glancing towards the grey clouds scudding across the sky, concern etched around his eyes.

'What's your background, George?'

'Farm worker, sir. Since a boy. Worked hard, saved hard, now ready for my own tenancy.'

James Blackwood nods his head. 'There's a lot of hard work in running a tenancy, George - risk, too.'

'Ain't afraid of hard work, sir - and the only risk is the weather.'

Once again, James Blackwood nods his head, a thoughtful look upon his face.

'George!' calls Eliza, from the dray, her voice ringing out across the yard. 'Help me down!'

'Aye, love!' he calls back. 'Excuse me, sir,' he says unto James Blackwood, then quickly hurries back across the yard and to help Eliza down from the dray, leaving a frowning land agent in his wake.

Standing next to George, Eliza is of similar height yet slim, though appears to be somewhat younger. Her hair is long, dark and wavy, almost black, and loosely tied at the nape of her neck with a red ribbon, from which a few tendrils hath escaped. Her face is clear and fair, with a sprinkling of freckles; her eyes are a vivid green and, despite her youth, do appear to be worldly-wise. A comely woman she is indeed. Her dress is crimson red, ankle-length, with a bodice; her boots are black

leather, ankle-length, too. And o'er her shoulders is a cream-coloured shawl, which she adjusts, to then dust herself off and retrieve her drawstring bag from the dray. Linking her arm through George's, she then leads him back to a still frowning James Blackwood.

As they approach, and with a smile, Eliza extends her hand. 'Good afternoon, sir. My name is Eliza Turner. You must be Mr William Blackwood, I presume?' she says in a manner and voice to that of James Blackwood, her cheeks dimpling, and her eyes twinkling as she dips at the knees in a curtsey, and draws a brief glance from George, as he shifts from one foot to the other whilst twisting his cap in his hands.

James Blackwood's frown deepens as he takes in the woman afore him. 'James Blackwood, madam! Your land agent! William Blackwood is my father, the landowner and lord of the manor,' is his reply, as he slowly and reluctantly extends his own hand to loosely and briefly grip Eliza's.

George shuffles his feet and worries his cap.

James Blackwood retrieves his hand, clears his throat, and looks back at George. 'To business, if we may, Mr Turner, then I'll show you around.'

George responds with a forced smile.

'As per our correspondence, the rent for the farm is to be paid half-yearly and in advance, and you will be responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the house and associated buildings for the duration of your tenure. Do you acknowledge and agree?' Both George and Eliza nod their heads in agreement. 'As a tenant farmer on the Blackwood estate, you will be expected to 'pay duty', and also carry out 'duty work', during busy seasonal periods like harvesting, and for which you will of course be paid in return.' He pauses to glance towards the horse and the heavily laden dray. 'Fine-looking horse, Mr Turner,' James Blackwood declares. 'Should you need any machinery or additional tools, the estate would be willing to assist you for a small rental fee. We can also supply you with seed and livestock at a competitive rate, should you also require.' He gives George a thin smile. 'Your tenancy is a 'tenancy at will'. This means you will be evicted if you are unable to pay the rent. Do you understand that, Mr Turner?'

Once again, they both nod. George pulls at the cap in his large, calloused hands, a look of uncertainty upon his face, whilst Eliza continues to smile, though the twinkle in her eyes appears somewhat dimmed.

'Now, regarding the rent…' says James Blackwood unto George, inclining his head and raising his eyebrows, the thin smile very much still in place.

George looks to Eliza, who opens her drawstring bag, reaches within, and then withdraws a fabric pouch tied at the top. 'It's all there, sir,' she says unto James Blackwood, coins chinking as she hands it o'er.

'I'm sure it is, Mrs Turner, but it would be remiss of me not to check,' is his reply as he unties the pouch to then glance within and at its contents. Giving a

slight nod of the head to acknowledge the amount is correct, he re-ties the pouch and slips it into his coat pocket.

Once more, he extends his hand to George, who looks at it briefly, unsure, then reaches out to grasp the proffered hand. 'Congratulations, George, you now have your own farm!' James Blackwood tells him.

On realisation, a broad smile crosses George's face. Ne'er hath I seen a man so both surprised and yet delighted.

'And the signing of the lease, sir?' Eliza asks of him.

James Blackwood gives her an irritated look, no doubt offended that a woman should have the temerity to question his position. 'Your lease will officially commence on the first day of September. Once you've settled in, we will arrange for you to come up to the manor house and conclude our business,' he tells her. And without further ado, he then turns to indicate the yard. 'As you can see, you have two horse stables, but they have in the past been used for pigs, goats and sheep, so entirely up to you what you do with them. The larger part of the barn is for storage, such as your dray, tools, and firewood - of which there are some logs left behind from the previous tenant. It also has a hayloft above. Behind the barn are your fields. Access is from the grassed track to the right-hand side of the farm and which runs down to a gate and your first field, which is pasture, the one behind that and running up to the edge of the wooded copse is arable - and most of which is overgrown, so it's going to take a little bit of work before you can even start sowing, George. On the left-hand side of the farm, you have a small orchard of a dozen apple trees. All told, you have about fifteen acres in total.' As he talks, he points out the orchard and fields in question, then glances at George to receive a nod of the head of acknowledgement, and then points towards the house. 'The two doors in the lean-to are to the wash house and water closet. Door adjacent to the lean-to is access to the yard from the house - the back door, as you people would say.'

Both George and Eliza gaze towards the back of the house to see that there are no windows other than a small window to the wash house, which is adjacent to the back door, and another small window in the end wall of the lean-to for the water closet.

'Hand pump for fresh spring water is just over there.' James Blackwood tells them, pointing to a cast-iron hand pump a few yards from the wash house. 'If you will follow me, we will enter via the front door,' he says unto them, to then set off in long strides around to the front of the house, leaving George and Eliza hurrying to catch up.

In the open porch, James Blackwood withdraws a large mortise key from his coat pocket and inserts it into the lock of the thick, heavy wooden door; the glass fanlight above is cracked. The door proves stiff to open, the heavy, rusted iron hinges creaking loudly as it does so. Once tis open, the daylight spills within to

reveal a narrow hallway and a timber stairway, its treads bare. Immediately off the hallway, to the left and right, are two unpainted Plank doors, doors made from wide vertical strips of hardwood timber, braced upon the back with horizontal iron strips, the wood faded with age, the iron dulled. The handles are thumb-latch, made of iron and painted black, though the paint upon the thumbs is now long worn away. Past the stairs and at the end of the hallway, and in the shadows where the daylight can barely reach, is the back door to the yard, another heavy timber door in neglect. The hallway floor is stone-flagged, yet worn smooth with years of footfall, and now scattered with the dead leaves of autumns' past, which hath blown within on the last tenant's departure, and the infrequent visits from those of the Blackwood estate. The whitewashed walls, once light and bright, are now dull and tinged with a yellow hue from the passage of time, also too the marks of wall hangings from long ago. Three coat hooks are fixed upon the wall just inside the front door. Upon one hook hangs a man's black jacket, upon another a woman's straw bonnet with a red ribbon tie; both are lightly coated in dust and hath no company but a spider that has made its cobwebbed home within the bonnet.

James Blackwood steps into the hallway, George and Eliza follow. And whilst James Blackwood withdraws a handkerchief to wipe his hands and to then remove his top hat, George and Eliza glance around, noses raised to the damp, musty air whilst listening to the silence of a cold, tomb-like house.

James Blackwood turns to the left-hand door and grips the thumb latch. A metallic clunk is heard. He then pushes the door open wide to reveal a small room with a single window, its timber shutters open. As in the hallway, the walls are whitewashed and aged, and the floor is stone-flagged. The ceiling is the exposed timber beams and floorboards of the room above. The fireplace is a black cast-iron with a timber surround and mantle. The only furnishings being two armchairs on either side of the fireplace, a Welsh dresser against the wall opposite the window, and a cobwebbed, covered oil lamp that hangs from a large metal hook in the centre of the ceiling. What little autumnal light and warmth are coming through the dirty window glass reveal a room coated in dust, undisturbed for many a while, and a feeling of cold. A room that has not seen light, nor warmth, nor the touch of a hand, for many a year.

'This is the parlour. A good clean and a lick of paint and it will be as good as new,' says James Blackwood, as he turns to then head up the stairs, his tread upon the bare wood, business-like and heavy, echoing throughout the empty house, whilst his boots leave an imprint in the dust, to guide those in his wake. After a brief glance into the parlour, George and Eliza hastily follow, their tread adding to the echo, a discordant beat of marching feet, clump, clump, clump. On and up they go to a small landing, its floorboards scarred with use, and two more Plank doors, one on the left and one on the right. The door on the left leads to an empty bedroom with whitewashed walls and ceiling, bare floorboards, and a fireplace

smaller than that of the parlour. A hole in the window glass allows the wind to blow through. James Blackwood then turns to the door on the right. 'The master bedroom,' he grandly announces, as the door opens wide. Tis of the same state. The same dust and the same fireplace as the bedroom afore. But also, there is an iron-framed bedstead upon which there is no mattress, a freestanding timber wardrobe, and a wooden table and wash bowl, all of which are far from new, having been used by so many, o'er the years.

As James Blackwood turns to lead them down the stairs, Eliza steps into the master bedroom. She gazes around, then slowly walks o'er to the wardrobe to open the door and peer within. She wrinkles her nose at the musty smell, then glances down at the yellowed newspaper that lines the bottom, its ink long faded.

Closing the door, she turns to the bedstead and gazes upon it for a brief moment. She approaches the bed to stand at its foot, and then rests her palms upon its top rail. Her eyes look troubled as they move o'er the bed, to take in the missing springs in its base and the downward sag of what remains. She gives a slight shudder, then quickly steps away and pulls her shawl tight about her shoulders.

She glances towards the open doorway where George is standing, watching and waiting, his cap twisting in his hands. Behind him, James Blackwood removes his pocket watch and checks the time, a frown upon his face.

'You alright, love?' a concerned-looking George asks of Eliza.

Eliza simply nods back, though her face is aught but right.

'Shall we press on?' asks James Blackwood of them both, to then head down the stairs, and without a reply.

'There's a feeling to this house, George,' Eliza says unto him, in a voice loudly whispered.

'Feels cold and damp to me,' is his muttered reply.

'No, more than that!'

'Come along!' calls James Blackwood from down below.

After some hesitation, whilst George and Eliza look to each other, they do follow James Blackwood down the stairs, their tread upon the wood once again beating out of time. Clump, clump, clump.

The remaining door leads through to the kitchen, where the ceiling beams and floorboards of the bedroom above are exposed as they are in the parlour. The floor is stone-flagged, and the whitewashed walls are much of the same as the rest of the house, though with light traces of soot hither and thither. At the far end of the room is a large black cast-iron cooking stove with a grate for burning logs and cooking o'er, an adjacent oven, and a hotplate for heating water. Its surround is tall and made of thick, polished slate, upon the top of which, high up, sits a mantle shelf. This stove was fitted when the house was first built, and a fine-looking stove it was indeed. But alas, tis now faded, no longer the lustres black it once was, but

pitted with rust and covered in ash and dust, and fallen chimney soot within the grate and upon the floor below. In the centre of the room, a scarred wooden table sits with four wooden chairs, all straight-backed and mismatched. Chairs that hath seated and served many a hungry soul o'er the years. Whilst above the table hangs an oil lamp, which has provided the light to do so. To the left of the stove is a door to the pantry, to the right hangs a pulley-and-rope ceiling airer and upon which to hang washing to dry when the weather is poor. Also to the right is a window that o'erlooks the front garden, and in front of which stands a narrow wooden frame that holds two wash bowls, with side pieces of flat wooden boards for pot washing and draining; though the flat boards now being twisted and warped from many a year of use. And upon the windowsill with traces of soot upon and around, lies a blackbird, a male, that died only the night afore, and the cause of the soot hither and thither. Alas, it had fallen down the chimney flue some days ago. In its panic to escape, the poor thing had flown around and around the kitchen, striking the walls to leave traces of soot, afore finally coming to rest upon the sill, weak and exhausted, helpless. It had eventually died of hunger and thirst, its life slowly slipping away, its wings flapping feebly for the very last time. Yet another life, sadly, no more, upon Oak Tree Farm.

Eliza walks o'er to the window and looks down at the body of the blackbird, so small and so frail. She reaches out, but stops short of touching it, her fingers hovering, to then withdraw and grip her shawl, and pull tighter, still. She looks up, peers out through the dirt-grimed glass, and towards the oak tree, now a darkening silhouette against the sky as dusk creeps up, her eyes flicking back and forth, searching, maybe. Is she looking for something? Is she imagining the blackbird nesting there, having a mate and raising its young? The only life to be seen in the oak tree now is a single crow, high up amongst its branches, its head turned, watching.

Time passes.

Eliza turns back to the two men across the room, her eyes moist, a single tear upon her cheek. She looks to George, who returns a smile, though weak, and fiddles with his cap and shuffles his feet.

James Blackwood coughs to clear his throat, then squares his shoulders. 'As I said earlier, Mrs Turner, a thorough clean and it will be as good as new. Nothing beyond a woman as capable as you, I'm sure,'

'What happened to the previous tenant, Mr Blackwood?'

For a brief moment, James Blackwood looks both surprised by the question and at a loss for an answer, only for that look to be quickly replaced with - once again - one of irritation. 'Death in the family, I'm afraid. Departed unexpectedly,' comes his reply. 'Now, if you will excuse me, I'd better be going before it gets too dark. We will arrange for you to come up to the manor to conclude our business and for you to meet Father. He likes to greet all his new tenants,' he says unto

them, his gaze then falling upon Eliza. And with that, he then bids them a good day and strides out.

A silence befalls the room, till the sound of a horse at a trot can then be heard, increasing to a canter, to then die away as distance is put between the horse and rider and Oak Tree Farm.

At the kitchen window, Eliza watches James Blackwood ride out through the gate and disappear into the gloom. When he can no longer be seen or heard, she turns her attention to the blackbird, to pick it up with a touch so tender to suggest tis still alive, its body soft and light, yet cold. She gently strokes it, smoothing its feathers back into place like an undertaker dressing a corpse.

'There's a lot to do before we can retire to bed, George. We need to get the stove lit for some hot water for cleaning. Can you do that for me?' she asks of him in a quiet, clear voice.

'What you going to do?'

'There's something I need to take care of first,' she says unto him, as she continues to stroke the blackbird.

Whilst George goes in search of firewood to light the stove for the first time in many a year, Eliza buries the blackbird beneath the oak tree as the sun slowly sinks below the horizon, talking to it as she does so in hushed, reverent tones, assuring it of a better life and that it will not be alone.

And all the whilst, watched o'er.

Inside, tis dark, silent, cold and tomb-like. Outside, tis night, with broken cloud, a waning moon, and a strong wind is blowing hard. Stable doors bang back and forth, the wind whistles through the hayloft rafters. The oak tree's boughs are swaying, waving, rhythmic; its upper branches more so, with crow protesting loudly. And upon the wind comes the smell of the patchwork quilt: earthy, rich soil; the floury scent of stooks and harvested wheat; dandelions, daisies, and flowers in bloom.

In the kitchen, tis dark and quiet, yet life is slipping away. Wings beat upon a window's sill, a beak pecks weakly at its glass. Unable to break free to the outside world, unable to soar high and free.

Time passes.

Wings now only flutter, feebly, pitifully; stopped. Body hunched, tired and drained; wings spread. Beak rests against the glass, whilst eyes still blink, though slower and slower. Then closed. Defeated. No movement, no stirring; no breath. No comfort, no solace; no life. And as the clouds drift across the moon, darkness falls upon the sill; a shroud for body and soul.

To hath slowly died of hunger and thirst must hath been a terrible, terrible thing. To die all alone, without those we hold dear, is a greater tragedy still. Yet to be trapped, with no escape, is indeed purgatory.

CHAPTER 2

Marshsted is an old farming village steeped in history, and folklore has it that the Romans once lived here to make salt from the sea, which, as the crow flies, tis not too far from here. But, tis said, their stay was short for they had to leave to defend their overseas empire. Once the Romans had left, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes arrived not long after to settle in small family groups, drawn by the freshwater springs and the rich grassland, planting their crops and grazing their animals upon the borders of the marshes. After them came the Danes and the Norsemen, bringing with them axe and sword and taking what they wished. Following them, centuries later, the Normans, armed with bow and arrow, also took what they wanted.

Taking what they want and by force, it would seem, tis something man has done throughout the ages, be it women and children into slavery and servitude; money and wealth; goods and chattels; or land, with the strongest of those men then becoming chiefs or lords of their manor, and to which the local villagers would become subservient. Indeed, the land upon which Oak Tree Farm now sits, once sat a farm of another name; Taylor's Steading, it was so called. A farmhouse of Mud and Stud, made from a timber frame with thin hedgerow branches as laths, plastered o'er with mud, straw and loam. It and the land were owned by a yeoman, a hardworking family man, good and true, who had everything he owned and loved, taken away from him; A heinous act, ne'er unavenged.

But alas, I digress.

O'er the centuries, those small groups of families with their own chiefs and Lords grew and grew to eventually become Marshsted, and which today has one Christian church, one pub, one blacksmith and a shop for provisions. It also has only one lord of the manor who owns most of the land hereabouts, and who also owns Oak Tree Farm.

Yet despite its history, Oak Tree Farm endures. Set back from the lane and from those who should pass, limestone walls weathered and worn, dirt-covered windows blind to all, rain-streaked and stained like tears upon a face, and with a grey slate roof, a hat that sits. Waiting and watching.

Waiting and watching.

And so, the sun rises, the sun sets, days pass, weeks pass, years pass. Tenants come, tenants go, some with families, some without. Fields are ploughed, fields are planted, fields are harvested, and fields fall back to nature, to once again become barren of all but weeds. The farm buildings fall into disrepair, whilst the house once again becomes devoid of life, untended and unloved.

Waiting and watching.

Waiting for a tenant to take on the tenancy, watching the world pass by on its way to church, and dressed in its Sunday best. First, as children, then, as young

adults, through to old age, and then to the grave. The full circle of life. Another generation has come, another generation has gone.

But today tis a day of celebration! Oak Tree Farm once again has new people! New life! A family to once again dwell within the four walls that hath stood alone and for so long, and without company; empty, gathering dust and slow decay. After years of abandonment and darkness, life and light hath finally arrived to chase the shadows away. A family to once again take up dwelling within a house that has seen so much. A family to rebuild, to farm, to care. A family once more to hath livestock grazing in the fields, poultry and swine in the yard. A family to once again sow seeds into the rich, fertile soil. Seeds that will hath to endure the harshness of winter afore the warming touch of the spring sun brings forth life.

O, but if only they had children! To watch children play with abandoned joy tis such a fine thing! To see them run barefoot and free through the pasture, play hide-and-seek, jump, splash, and paddle in the duck pond. And O, to see their glee and excitement when yule-tide finally arrives. To witness their innocence of youth, to see them grow up to become adults, experience love and to hath children of their own, would make my heart sing.

If only.

I truly hath hopes for this family, that they may dwell upon from this land and achieve what others afore them hath not, and live in harmony with nature and be prosperous and happy. That would be a gift. A gift of salvation.

CHAPTER 3

As the sun slowly and quietly peeks o'er the horizon, and its rays creep forth to bathe all afore it with an orange hue, the shadows slowly slip away. Darkness now banished, creatures of the night prepare to slumber: barn owl to roost within the stone building out in the pasture; dog fox, vixen and cubs to their apple orchard den, and Hedgehog Sow and hoglets to their nest behind the long barn. For now, tis the turn of the creatures of the day.

Birdsong is first, a single male blackbird trilling its song, others soon to follow. A cock pheasant, too, his crow, less melodic, yet beautiful still, in his own way. Farmyard hens, newly arrived and impatient for food, neighbouring cattle and sheep, equally so. The greetings of creatures great and small, and a hello to all. O, what a comforting sound! O, what a joy to be alive!

If only.

Tis, without doubt, the beginning of a beautiful day. Oak Tree Farm house is bathed in sunlight, the window shutters closed in slumber against the night just passed; life within is yet to stir. The morning is still young, and all is as it was. Yet, a sense of something different. To the outside world, all appears unchanged. No different to that of the day afore and the day afore that, and the year afore, and the years preceding. But tis different. For now, there is purpose.

Tis dark. George awakens with a start, his eyes blinking hard against the night's sleep, his head turning left, then turning right, unsure, it would seem, of where he is and what has awakened him. He gives another start as yet another peal from a church bell rings out. Tis Sunday, the Lord's Day.

George and Eliza worked long into the night to make the house habitable and a home again. Due to the late hour of their arrival, they worked on the kitchen and the furnished bedroom only, sweeping away years of dust and cobwebs from all that was covered, then scrubbing with hot water and soap till spotless. Once done, they brought in their bedding and enough kitchenware for breakfast the following morning, leaving the rest of their belongings upon the dray and within the barn, afore collapsing into bed, exhausted.

Pulling the blanket up under his chin against the early morning chill of the room, George wriggles closer to Eliza for warmth, the old iron-framed bed creaking loudly as he does so. He lies awhilst and listens to the delicate trill of bird song, the vibrant peal of the bell from the church at the top of the lane, and the cock pheasant's crow as it bids good morning to one and all. Although the room is dark for the window being shuttered tightly, a thin, bright light can be seen around the edges, and an indication of what lies beyond. George wriggles some more, then throws back the blanket and gets out of bed, the old iron frame again creaking loudly, and bringing forth a sleepy groan from Eliza.

Kneeling down next to the bed, George reaches under, searching, groping in the dark. Not finding what he is looking for, he struggles back to his feet,

grumbling to himself as he does so, to then carefully shuffle o'er to the window to open the shutters and flood the room with bright sunshine. Eliza, irritated by the light, groans once again as she pulls the blanket up o'er her head. Now aided by the light of day, George resumes his search beneath the bed, to then pull out a chamber pot with a victorious grunt. Returning to the window, he places the pot upon the waist-high sill, raises the hem of his long white cotton nightshirt, then tucks it under both arms, to expose stomach and lower regions. Then, grasping the pot with one hand and his manhood with the other, he relieves himself, giving out a long and satisfied sigh, and smiling broadly as he does so.

Whilst he does his business, he gazes out the window at the view that lies afore him. The large ancient oak is first and foremost, in full leaf and laden with acorns, and amongst whose branches two squirrels now scamper, searching for food. Looking down to the front of his new property, he takes in the crumbling stone walls and the white and yellow carpet of daisies and dandelions, their jewels of dew yet to disappear with the morning sun. The crowing cock pheasant is perched upon the ill-hanging gate. With gold, brown, and black speckles upon its body, a ring of white around its neck, a head of blue and green, and a distinctive red wattle, tis a beautiful bird indeed, its long, elegant tail and feathers desired by fashion and fishermen alike. The pheasant suddenly gives a loud and vexed squawk, then clumsily flies off, disturbed, it would appear, by two ladies walking by and who are dressed for Sunday service. They glance towards the farmhouse, no doubt curious about its new inhabitants, as villagers oft are, word having no doubt quickly spread, to see a figure at the window. They smile and wave.

Upon realising he is the focus of their attention, the broad smile upon George's face quickly disappears to be replaced with a look of mortification. Giving himself a vigorous shake, he hastily withdraws from the window. He replaces the chamber pot back beneath the bed, stubbing his toe upon the iron bed leg as he does so and causing him to loudly curse. The bed creaks frantically as he clambers back within, fighting with his tangled nightshirt as he does so, to then lie close against Eliza's warm body, and causing her to give a start when his cold feet touch hers.

'George!' comes a muffled cry from beneath the blanket, which is then whipped away to reveal Eliza's sleepy face, her long, dark hair unpinned and loose across her pillow, green eyes squinting against the bright sunshine, her brow furrowed in vexation as she brushes tendrils of hair from her face, to then rub at her eyes.

'You have beautiful hair,' George says unto her.

'And you have cold feet!' comes her reply, as she jabs him in the ribs with her elbow, and causes him to roll away.

Moments pass as they lie upon their backs, staring up at the white, faded, and flaking ceiling. Eliza rubs the sleep from her eyes, whilst George rubs his ribs.

'It's Sunday,' George says unto the ceiling.

'I know,' is Eliza's reply.

'People are going to church.'

'I'm sure they are.'

'Maybe we should go.'

Eliza turns her head to look at George, a look of bewilderment upon her face. 'And why would we want to do that, George, we're not religious!'

George pauses for a moment, thinking. 'Well, I ain't, *ain't* religious… I'm just… You know… what's that word? That big word?'

'Agnostic.'

'Aye, that's it, agnostic. I'm agnostic.'

'That doesn't explain why we should go to church.'

'To meet people… villagers… our new neighbours, maybe.'

'I'm a pagan, George. Why would I want anything to do with Christianity, let alone go into a church?'

George shrugs.

'And we do not mention to people I'm a pagan, by the way, George.'

George frowns. 'You also said don't mention we ain't married. Ain't being married can't be worse than being a witch, can it?'

'Being a pagan doesn't make me a witch, George. We were all pagans before Christianity came along. Paganism is simply about living in harmony with nature. But you're right, we do need to meet people - if only because we need to know where to buy livestock, seed for sowing, or just knowing who the blacksmith is.'

'James Blackwood said he could help.'

'I don't trust him. And I don't like the idea of having to 'pay duty' as well as rent!'

'That's the way of tenant farming, my love. Paying 'duty' and 'duty work' to your landlord has been done since way back when. But he's a cocky, young fellow, I'll give you that. Struts around like a game bird.'

They both return to studying the ceiling.

'So, if we're ain't going to church, and we ain't going to ask James Blackwood, where'll we find out what we need to know?' George then asks of her.

'The village shop or the pub. Especially the pub, always a good place for information and bartering.'

'Hm, and you should know,' George mutters to the ceiling.

Eliza gives him a brief, but sharp, look.

'What animals are you going to get?' she asks of him, some minutes later.

'Well, to start off, we need a dairy cow for milk, butter and cheese… a dozen sheep, maybe - will need to know who's got a ram to put 'em to… and a couple of pigs, I think.'

Eliza rolls onto her side and lays an arm across George's chest, her head upon his shoulder. 'The house and outbuildings are going to need a lot of work. The house roof, boundary walls and gates. Stables, too.' She pauses. 'All the windows and doors, both outside and inside, for sure.'

Sure, you ain't forgotten anything?' he asks of her, his eyebrows raised and with a sideways glance.

'Might as well give the inside a lick of paint as well,' Eliza continues, without acknowledging George's look or comment. 'I'll finish cleaning the rest of the house, of course, while you tend to farm business. And I'll always make sure you've got a clean shirt for work, and a cooked meal waiting for you at the end of the day - like any good wife.'

'We ain't married,' he reminds her.

'This has been a long time coming, George, ever since we met that day in the pub just over a year ago. You with your troubled past, me with mine. This is our dream, and now we get to live it. It's meant to be, George. Our fate is in our own hands,' she says unto him, sadness and hope both crossing her face as she does so.

A silence befalls the room.

'This farm is going to need a lot of money. What did you do with your tin of savings?' she then asks of him.

'Buried it in the corner of the big barn.'

She nods her head. 'You're going to have to get the wheat and hay seeds in soon for next year's harvest, aren't you?'

'Aye,' comes his reply, a pensive look upon his face. 'Time's short. Hay seeds need to go in no later than September, wheat no later than October, to be certain they'll take and survive the winter. First things first, though, need to see how overgrown the land is before me and Horse can plough, 'cause -'

'You need to give him a name,' Eliza says unto him.

'Eh? Who?' he asks of her, turning to look.

'The horse! You need to give him a name.'

'Why? He's always been called Horse, ever since he's been a colt.'

'Exactly! All the more reason to give him a name.'

George turns away, gently shaking his head. 'As I was 'bout to say, it don't look like much has been done around 'ere for a while.'

'It'll all be fine, George, this house feels good.'

'That ain't what you said last night when we arrived.'

I said there's a feeling to this house. I didn't say whether it was good or bad.'

'Look on your face, didn't say that!'

'I wasn't sure, then. Probably tired from travelling. But I am now. This house feels right... though…'

George turns back to her. 'What?'

'The blackbird…'

'What blackbird?'

'The one that was in the kitchen… It's not a good sign… Not a good omen…' comes her reply, worry etched around her eyes.

Looking ill at ease and at a loss for words, George gives yet another shake of his head.

The church bells hath ceased their ringing.

Time passes; neither Eliza nor George speaks. They lay, staring up at the ceiling, listening to the silence within the house and the sounds of nature without.

'What's that noise?' Eliza eventually asks aloud.

'What noise?'

'Scratching noise… very faint.'

George lies very still, listening hard, and with a frown upon his face.

The scratching sound then comes again, yet tis so faint.

'Mice,' George decides. 'Or bats,' he then adds.

They lay awhilst, listening to the faintest of noises.

'How old do you think this place is?' Eliza asks of him. 'A hundred years old? Two hundred? You can sense the history within the four walls of this old house. And I bet if it could, it would tell you a few stories about what it must have seen over the years. About the families that lived here and farmed the land. The people who have come and gone over time, all having left their mark and their presence.' Eliza turns her head to smile at George. 'It almost feels alive, like a living thing. I can feel it, George.'

'I'm sure you can, love,' comes George's reply, his uneasy look returning. 'Think I'd better be making a start. See the lie of the land.'

Eliza gives him a kindly smile. 'Hungry?' she asks of him, to which he gives a nod of the head. 'I'll make you breakfast before you go.'

And so, a new day, a new start. A new day and a new start for George and Eliza, a new day and a new start for Oak Tree Farm, and a new day and a new start for me.