

The Guest Who Stayed: Chapter 1 – 1915-1917

Jed: August 1917

Clouds were blowing in from the North Sea and temperatures had begun to dip. Jed was walking back from Frampton where he was apprenticed to a local handyman. At sixteen, he was still too young to be fighting in the war like his eldest brother, Matthew, who had left triumphantly two years earlier to join the Norfolk Regiment.

As he turned the bend in the drive leading to the farmhouse, his attention was drawn to the unfamiliar sound of an engine making its way along the road from Frampton. There were still not many petrol vehicles in this part of the country. Some of the better off farmers had begun to purchase diesel tractors but in the main the fields were still worked by the faithful shire horses which had trodden the loamy Norfolk soil for generations.

He saw a motor bike turn off the main road and onto the farm track. As it made its way towards him, he could see that it was painted khaki and the rider seemed to be in uniform. The bike growled onwards, throwing up clouds of dust from the unmade track. Jed expected the rider would stop to ask directions but he continued on past, with just the slightest inclination of his head.

Jed stopped where he was, gripped by a sense of unease. The bike stopped on the gravel outside the front door. He watched as the rider kicked down the stand and took an envelope from a pouch strapped to the back of the bike. Then he appeared to glance from side to side as if expecting someone else to join him. Having decided that he was on his own, he made his way to the front door and banged with his fist.

Jed's heart began to race as he waited. The door opened to reveal his mother. She was wearing her baking apron over a brown woollen dress. Strands of black hair had broken away from the bun on the back of her head and hung casually across her face. Jed saw the rider hand over the envelope. He couldn't see his mother's expression but he saw her rip the envelope open.

She let out a penetrating scream. He raced towards the house, tripping, stumbling, thorns tearing at his legs. His mother was now crumpled on the floor. The man stood motionless on the same spot. As he reached the garden fence, he saw that his father and his elder brother Tom were already at the scene. He vaulted the fence and arrived by the door as his father was lifting his mother from the step. His father's face was ashen and blank. His mother sobbed uncontrollably as she was carried into the

parlour. The door was slammed in Jed's face and he was left listening to the sounds of despair - his father's voice as he'd never heard him before, braying, gasping, breathless yelps.

Jed realised that he was shaking uncontrollably. He heard the engine of the bike start up and the wheels move away over the gravel. He banged on the door.

"Ma, Pa, let me in, please let me in."

Moments later the door opened and Tom came out. Tears rolled down his cheek. He took Jed by the shoulder and led him away from the parlour.

After the news of Matt's death at the Somme, life for Jed began to change. When the official period of grieving was over, a steel shutter seemed to slam closed in the household. Photos of Matt disappeared and his name was not mentioned. Jed yearned to talk about the brother he had idolised and sometimes tried to draw his mother into conversation.

"Ma, I was thinking earlier about that time that me and Matt went fishin' over the ponds on the heath. And do you remember, Matt goes chasin' a puppy an' falls in the water and you's right mad with 'im 'cos 'e's lost a shoe in the water and ..." She interrupted him.

"Jed, let it lie. What the Lord giveth, the Lord taketh and we can't interfere. We just have to accept what comes our way and hope death takes us from this miserable life quick."

The impact on Jed's mother had been particularly severe. In a dour family of farm labourers who seldom smiled or celebrated, Matt had stood out like a shining beacon. He represented all that Jed's mother would have liked for herself but never had the slightest chance of achieving. Through Matt and the stories he told her, she had begun to live a little. Though she scolded him for his cheek and misbehaviour, inside she had rejoiced in his irreverence, self-confidence and appetite for life.

Whilst Jed's father and Tom took refuge in their work and seldom left the outbuildings where some job always made demands, his mother became increasingly depressed and dependant on Jed. It wasn't long before he had to take time off work to care for her as her health was declining rapidly.

Almost a year after Matt's death she was diagnosed with consumption and took to her bed. There was no money to pay for nurses so Jed had to take on the role of full time carer. It was a job he hated but it was made plain to him that he had no choice. As his mother's health deteriorated and she became bedridden, he found himself

having to care for her very private needs - helping her wash and deal with toilet pans. As she declined further, his mother lost her sense of modesty and Jed often saw her withered body exposed to him as he struggled to cope with her daily care.

This was his initiation into the world of women. Whilst other young lads his age were becoming sexually active and their minds were beginning to fill with erotic fantasies, Jed was witnessing his mother's physical decline, hating the site of her wrinkled skin and the stale smell of urine that constantly filled his nostrils.

Alice: September 1917

The rain fell in sheets across the flat Norfolk country permeating every item of their clothing. They had been walking for three days now along tracks and unmade roads, running away from the scene of their father's latest drunken exploits.

"Father, can we stop for a few minutes? Polly needs a rest. Look, she's exhausted."

He had been warned by the local police constable that unless they packed their bags and left, he would be arrested and thrown into Norwich gaol.

"Only a few more miles now and then we're at Frampton. We're sure to find somewhere warm to sleep tonight. Just keep going a while longer."

With that, he picked up the kit bag that contained their sole belongings and slung it over his shoulder. He strode forward without looking back to where Alice and Polly were huddled under a tree. Seeing him disappear into the mist and rain, Alice had no alternative but to gather Polly up into her arms and follow him.

It had been so very different until five years ago when Alice's mother gave birth to young Polly. Their father had been a respected metal smith, mending agricultural machinery and making simple farming implements. They had lived comfortably, feeding themselves from the cottage garden and using what little money their father made for occasional luxuries. Alice, who was ten when Polly was born, attended the local village school and had surprised her teachers with her tenacity and determination to succeed in her subjects.

Then, when her mother died a year after Polly's birth, their world fell apart. Their father found consolation in drink and was prone to outbursts of violence which could be directed equally at his daughters or to other drinkers in the ale houses he frequented. When money became scarce, he thought nothing of stealing from shops or from friends. At first, neighbours rallied round to help Alice care for Polly but, as they

were met with drunken abuse and insults, the help soon evaporated. Alice was able to attend school less and her father began to treat her as a substitute wife, demanding that she carry out chores and occasionally beating her if she failed. Alice lived in fear of him hurting Polly whose health was beginning to deteriorate. From once having been a plump and boisterous baby, she now had a sallow complexion and was nervous with people.

“Look, this is it. This is Frampton,” he announced.

“But where are we going to stay? Where’s the cottage you spoke of?”

Alice guessed the truth. There was no cottage. Her father had heard of fruit picking work in the area with accommodation provided, but there was no specific offer of a place to stay. It was only gossip passed on by drinkers in an ale house somewhere.

“I’ll go to find it. I know it’s not far from here. I want you to stay put whilst I go looking. I’ll be back before long and I’ll bring some food too. Mind you stay here.”

With that he was gone, striding into the evening gloom. Alice held Polly close to her and stared at the bleak surroundings. The road they were following wound through a wood and the foliage seemed to offer some protection. Alice dragged the kit bag that her father had left behind into the wood and felt inside for an old army tarpaulin, the prize for some bet her father had wagered. Still damp from the previous night, she hung it over an overhanging branch and placed stones on the extended sides to form a basic shelter. Then she gathered Polly into her arms and they both huddled together, listening to the monotonous patter of drizzle on the tarpaulin.

Peering out into the grey gloom, Alice felt heavy with fatigue and depression. She seemed trapped in this spiral of decline which got worse with each day. She had to find a way to escape yet leaving Polly to her fate with a drunken father was not an option. She feared each day for Polly’s safety as well as her own. Soon she would be sixteen and was already experiencing some sexual harassment from her father – comments about her breasts, unwanted touching and lewd language. She shuddered with her private memories.

Dusk turned into night and still he didn’t return. Alice and Polly slept fitfully, being awoken by strange unseen sounds in the dark. Then a different noise roused Alice. In the distance she could hear the faint sound of someone singing – a tuneless, flat dirge. She knew at once that it was her father returning. He had spent their

remaining money on drink. There would be no food and no proper shelter. They would spend the rest of the night like wild and hungry animals.

Flora: October 1915

Flora and her mother and father were made to wait outside the small chapel which had been created from one of the cottages. The Brotherhood owned a dozen of these rundown premises which were situated in a working district of Frampton. They cast their eyes down as latecomers made their way past them into the chapel. Flora's father was dressed in a black suit with a starched white shirt buttoned tightly to his neck. Her mother wore a long black dress with white cuffs and a black bonnet. Flora was dressed in her usual chapel attire, a black cotton dress over which she wore a white apron, a sign that she was a virgin.

The door of the chapel opened and a lean, white haired, old man spoke to them.

“The congregation is ready. You must answer to the people in the sight of our Lord.”

He stood aside and Flora's father led the way into the chapel. Her mother followed with her head bowed low and Flora walked behind.

Inside, the chapel was dimly lit and meagrely furnished. Six rows of seats were positioned either side of an aisle. They were filled with Brotherhood members, most of whom directed their gaze at the floor. A few looked with curiosity at the strange procession. At the end of the aisle, and below a large wooden crucifix, were three seats set out for Flora and her parents. To the right of these and facing the congregation were six seats, five of which were occupied by elders. The sixth was taken by the senior elder who had brought Flora and her family into the chapel. He remained standing and spoke.

“It is the tradition of our church that those who deviate from our laws be judged by the congregation in the eyes of our Lord and that those who are found guilty of transgressions shall be banished from our midst. Today, we are called to pass judgement on the Fulton family: Harold Fulton, his wife, Henrietta Fulton, and their thirteen year old daughter, Flora Fulton. It is in respect of the activities and behaviour of Flora Fulton and the refusal of her parents to curb her sinful ways that we are gathered here. Let me first remind you of the rules of the Brotherhood which have been passed down to us since the founding of our church in 1778 by the Venerable

Thomas Aitchison. In the sacred words of Psalm 1, 'Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly.'"

Flora sat rigidly on her chair gripping the sides till her knuckles were white. She wished she could be anywhere but here, part of this terrible stifling institution that infiltrated all aspects of their lives. The doctrine ordained that they had to be pure; they had to avoid contact with all other sinners, which in practice meant everyone else except church members. They were expected to marry within the church and avoid all forms of entertainment. The church provided them with work and basic sustenance so that they became dependant for everything.

"Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you."

Flora had heard this quotation from Corinthians and many like it used to justify the teachings of the church. Since her earliest memories, she had been encouraged to learn and chant passages from the bible. Learning a new passage was one of the few ways she knew to please her parents.

"And so it is," she heard the elder saying, "that in spite of much counselling and warning, the Fulton child has been permitted to break our sacred rules."

He proceeded to read a list of alleged transgressions, some of which Flora recognised and some of which were pure fabrications. It was common within the Brotherhood to gain favour with the elders by telling them about the supposed wrong doing of your neighbours.

"Spending time with sinners and taking part in impure activities."

She had to attend the village school because the community was too small to have its own school. She had been told by her parents to remain separate from the other children and read her bible during breaks. But their constant teasing and taunting made this difficult in practice.

"Reading forbidden and impure literature."

Her teacher at school had loaned her great novels to read because she showed promise. Is this what he meant?

"Going into the homes of non believers and taking sustenance therein."

On a cold winter's day last Christmas, Flora had been invited into the home of a fellow pupil whose mother had taken pity on her. She had accepted a mince pie yet somehow word had got back to the elders. All her life it seemed she had been controlled and manipulated by others in the name of faith, respect or fear. How she

longed to be rid of these shackles yet she knew that once she left the Brotherhood she would be ostracised for the rest of her life. The Brotherhood was not forgiving. They would forbid her from ever seeing her own family again.

Now it was the turn of her father to address the congregation and plead for forgiveness in the name of his daughter. How she hated his demeaning and obsequious manner. His tall and gaunt figure was bent from the shoulders down and he wrung his hands in a gesture of piety as he addressed his audience.

“Dearest neighbours and fellow worshippers, in the name of Christ we have always sought to provide a strict and righteous way of life to protect ourselves and our daughter from the evils of the world. We have sought to remain exclusive and reject the ways of the devil in line with the teachings of our leader. But the devil has exploited our weakness and found his way into our lives through the frailties of our daughter.”

Flora remembered a time when they had first come to Frampton. Then, her parents were full of hope and welcomed the friendship of the Brotherhood who helped them find accommodation and even provided work for her father. In those early days, there were frequent feasts and days of rejoicing when the church would be decorated with flowers and bunting would be strung across the small square around which the cottages were arranged. Then new people arrived and there was a change of direction. All frivolity was forbidden and the doctrine of ‘separation’ from non church members came into being.

“You have heard the views of the elders and you have heard the views of Harold Fulton speaking on behalf of his daughter.”

The senior elder was standing and addressing the congregation. Flora fixed her gaze on the floor in front. She felt the eyes of the congregation drilling into her very being.

“It is the view of the elders that the Fulton family must be punished for permitting blatant acts of defiance against the rules of our church. We have heard the pleas of Harold Fulton and believe that he truly repents of his daughter’s sins. However, he was negligent in permitting the sins to occur in the first place. It is, therefore, the recommendation of the elders that the Fulton Family be ‘isolated’ for a period of thirty days. During this period, no member of the Church will speak to them or participate in any activity that includes them. They will be banned from eating in the

presence of other members of our congregation and will be required to repent publicly once a week of their sins. Are you in agreement with the verdict of the elders?"

A low murmur of ascent rose up from the congregation.

"Then it is decided. 'Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord.'"

The congregation dispersed, leaving Flora, her mother and her father sitting on their seats with their eyes cast downward. In the silence of the empty chapel, only the whimpering of her mother could be heard. Then, with a roar that seemed as though it came from the depths of hell itself, her father delivered a savage blow to Flora's face which threw her from her chair and sent her spinning across the stone floor until she hit the opposite wall. As she felt a searing pain engulf her head, she knew that she could no longer live like a trapped animal in this perverse community. Somehow she had to find the strength to leave.

Jack: November 1917

He lay still in the rickety bed, trying not to wake the other three members of his unit. His army issue tunic itched across his back and he had an overwhelming desire to scratch vigorously. He contemplated turning to his right to face the damp wall, but the smell of mildew deterred him. If he turned to his left he would come face to face with Bill's boots, still encrusted with cow dung from the yard outside. So he remained on his back and shifted his body back and forth against the rough mattress to achieve some measure of relief.

Intermittent snoring from the other bed where Greg and Fred slept told him that he was the only one awake. If he listened carefully, he could hear guns booming from the distant front line. How lucky he was to be in the relative safety of this French farm house rather than the squalid hell of the trenches. It was less than six weeks since he had been pulled from his unit on the front line near Ypres and told to report to HQ some two miles back from the fighting. It was in a bombed and half ruined French chateau that he was introduced to his three unit members. Jack had been chosen for his fluent French, Greg for his pyrotechnic skills, Bill for his combat skills and Fred for his way with the carrier pigeons. They were to form a unique unit in the British army and try something that had seldom been attempted before - to go behind enemy lines and collect intelligence.

As trench warfare became increasingly futile, pressure had grown on the British Government to inject new life into the war initiative. The voices of younger officers began to be heard, considered heretics by the older brigade who had learnt their fighting skills confronting Zulu warriors in Africa. The new voices talked of intelligence, sabotage and espionage. And so Jack led his squad of three men across no man's land one dark night in April to acquire intelligence and feed false information to the Germans through a network of French collaborators.

Chief amongst these collaborators were two sisters in their mid twenties, Yvette and Simone. Their parents had died before the war and left the sisters to run the small farm consisting of a few milking cows and goats plus numerous hens. Jack had met Yvette in a café and, using his impeccable French, had recruited her and her sister. Now the unit lived in the farmhouse with the two girls - the four men sharing two single beds in one room.

Lying on his back with the first light of dawn filtering through the tattered curtains, Jack knew that their position here was precarious and they would need to move on. As the network of collaborators increased, so the opportunity grew for someone to inform the Germans in return for favours. Outside the window, he could hear the cooing of the carrier pigeons in their basket, waiting for their turn to carry messages back to the British front line.

He thought he heard a rustle, a scrape of a boot - something out of the ordinary. His body froze and his right hand gripped the knife that was strapped to his leg above his right boot.

With explosive force, the door to the room splintered from its hinges and the air filled with shrieking German voices. Guns fired. Bullets ricocheted off stone walls and a smell of cordite invaded the room.

He leapt from the bed, brandishing his knife and lashing out wildly. In the smoke and confusion it was impossible to make out what was happening. The room was full of enemy. Through the smoke, he could just make out their silhouettes. The sound of Germans yelling was now joined by the agonised screams of his comrades as rifle butts pounded their prostate bodies. Jack let out a primal roar and leapt with his knife outstretched towards one of the attacking figures. In full flight he was caught on the back of his head by a leaden instrument and his body crashed heavily onto the stone floor.

When he awoke, he was aware of being trussed with his hands tied to his feet. His head was on the floor and a sticky red substance flowed from his nose. His line of vision was limited but he could see Greg and Bill on the stone slabs bound and bleeding. A black boot was landing heavy kicks into Bill's groin, each strike causing further agonised screams. By moving his head slightly, he could see Yvette. Her night clothes had been ripped from her body and she was kneeling on the floor with her hands bound behind her. Outside of his line of vision, he could hear the sounds of another woman screaming. He felt a pistol pushed against his temple and heard the click of the trigger being cocked.

The Guest Who Stayed: Chapter 2 – Autumn 1919

Jed

Jed sat disconsolately on the top of Offa's Mount, a large outcrop of rock in an otherwise flat landscape. It had been a favourite place to visit with his elder brother Matt when he was younger. From here, you could see for miles across the flat and featureless Norfolk country. To the east, it was just possible to catch glimpses of the sea sparkling on the horizon. The origins of the rock were hotly debated, some claiming it was a meteorite from outer space, others arguing that it had been deposited there by an ancient glacier. Human remains had been found at the bottom of the steepest face suggesting that it had once been used as a sacrificial site.

He came here to think. Since his mother's death less than a year ago, he'd tried to become involved in running the farm with his father and Tom. But the daily ritual bored him. Walking behind the two Shire horses as they ploughed the ground ready for winter barley, his sense of isolation only grew. He sometimes wondered whether he truly existed or whether he was just a figment of someone's imagination. When he was with people they didn't really seem to notice him.

It had been so different with Matt. People had been drawn to him, even from an early age. If he was naughty, people said he was mischievous and laughed. When Jed was naughty, people shouted at him and he was punished. It seemed so wrong that it was Matt who had been killed. Matt had already achieved so much and would have succeeded at whatever he did, bringing great joy to his mother. Jed had achieved so little and had no idea where he was going. His life seemed to stretch ahead of him like a void.

Looking out across the fields below him dotted with newly stacked hay bales, Jed realised it was time to confront this demon. At eighteen, he felt unprepared and ill equipped for what lay ahead but he knew for certain that his destiny lay somewhere down there in the real world – not suffocating up here on the family farm.

Alice

The cottage was cold and cramped. Water dripped from the broken thatch and formed puddles on the clay floor. Alice was struggling to cook a meal on the stove but the meagre flame from the coals was failing to heat the rabbit stew. Polly was seated

close to the stove to warm her thin body. She had developed a chesty cough and Alice feared for her health.

Her father was readying himself to go out. As soon as he'd eaten, he'd be off to the Fox and Hounds in Frampton to join his drinking friends. Since they'd arrived in Frampton he'd managed to secure occasional employment and this tumbledown cottage was at least better than sleeping under a tarpaulin.

But money was still in scarce supply. Sometimes there was no money for days on end yet still he managed to drink. Alice feared he was stealing again and if he was found out, they'd be forced back on the road. That was why Alice had been enquiring about part time work. She'd also been corresponding secretly with an aunt in London, collecting letters from the post office rather than let them be delivered. She needed to speak to her father before he engaged in another bout of drinking.

"Father, I've got something I need to tell you," began Alice as she doled his stew onto a plate. "I've got a little job lined up, nothing much but it'll help out a bit and bring in a little money."

"What sort of job?" he enquired slurping stew into his mouth.

"Working in the baker's shop in the mornings – seven till eleven. I'll be home in plenty of time to get your lunch."

"What do you need to work for? Your place is at home looking after me."

"But, Father, we need the extra money. We need clothes for Polly and she needs feeding regular like. Sometimes she only has one meal a day."

"So what are you saying? Are you tellin' me I ain't providing for my little girl, because if that's what you're saying you can shut your bleedin' trap – Bitch."

With this he leant forward to hit her, but the weight of his body tipped the wooden table and sent the contents crashing to the floor where they formed a sludge of broken earthenware and rabbit stew. Alice rushed to the scullery and tried to close the door, knowing what would follow. But before she could slide the bolt he had his shoulder pinned to the door. Desperately, she pushed against the weight of his body.

"Father, please, I'll still be here to look after you. It's just a little job, that's all."

He heaved at the door and pushed it further open. Alice braced herself against a work table, using all her strength to keep him out. But he managed to squeeze his unshaven head around the door and Alice found her face inches away from his, breathing in the stench from his stale mouth. His toothless grin sent shudders down her spine.

“You see, you can never get away from me our little Alice,” he called in a taunting voice. “Your place is here with me and if you don’t understand that I’m going to teach you a lesson so you’ll never forget.”

She heard him trying to undo the belt to his trousers and knew what to expect. Feeling his weight still pressing against the door, she adjusted her own position with her back to the table. Then stepping quickly sideways, she pulled the door open which had the effect of propelling her father forward in an uncontrolled stumble, crashing headlong into a clothes mangle and crumpling into a heap on the stone floor.

Seizing a knife from a drawer, she held it in front of her, expecting the next attack. Her main thought was to prevent him getting to Polly in this state. She braced herself, prepared to use the knife if necessary. But instead of an attack, she heard crying. Her father was holding his head and crying loudly.

Alice was rooted to the ground, completely unprepared for this. She had only ever seen aggression and rage burning in his eyes. But something had snapped. His misery was so deep that finally it had engulfed him.

“Father, stop that at once,” Alice heard herself saying with an authority she didn’t recognise. “I’ll be here for you but there are going to be changes. I am going to work because we need the money. And though it breaks my heart, I’ve arranged for Polly to go and stay with Mother’s sister in London. She’s ill, Father, and she can’t stay here any longer. It’s killing her.”

Tears were spilling down Alice’s own cheeks now as she leant down to place a hand on her father’s shoulder.

“Things has got to change now and you must accept that, Father, because with Polly gone, there’s nothing holding me here anymore.”

Flora

They had told her to expect a visitor but they hadn’t said who it would be. Visitors seldom came to their cottage so Flora knew it must be important. She had been told to wear her black church dress with the white apron. Her father wore a black suit with a starched white collar. Her mother was dressed in her black gown and grey bonnet trimmed with white lace.

There was a light knock at the door. Flora’s father heaved his bent body from the chair and shuffled to the entrance. The door opened to reveal a man who Flora knew was one of the church elders, Eli Krautz. He was in his early sixties but looked older.

His head was bald except for a fringe of white tufts which circumnavigated the perimeter of his crown. His lack of growth on top was compensated for by the abundance of hair sprouting from his ears and his nose.

“Brother Eli, what an honour to welcome you to our humble home. Please come in and be at peace,” grovelled Flora’s father as Eli Krautz made his way into the living room.

Flora couldn’t understand why a church elder was paying them a visit. Had she been involved in some ‘transgression’? She couldn’t recollect anything. For months now she had hardly left the community, spending most of her time sewing in the work shop.

“Brother Eli, this is my wife Henrietta and, of course, this is my daughter, Flora.”

Eli observed them impassively but said nothing.

“Such an honour deserves a celebration. Would you care to take a little wine?”

Eli inclined his head slightly forward and this was taken by Flora’s father to signal consent. He reached up to a high shelf and took down a dusty bottle. This was the only alcoholic drink in the house and to Flora’s knowledge it had lain there untouched for two years. Her father blew the dust from the bottle and poured out two glasses. He gave one to Eli and took one for himself. The women received nothing.

“Please be seated, Brother Eli. Flora, this is indeed a great honour for our family.”

She was immediately alerted to danger. Her father never addressed her directly in the presence of other people.

“Brother Eli is being spoken about as the next leader of our congregation – a very great honour. Therefore, the news that he brings is even more wonderful for our family.”

Flora’s father inclined his head towards Eli in the expectation that he would deliver the news, but Eli continued to stare impassively ahead.

“Well, the wonderful news, daughter, is that Brother Eli, in spite of your past indiscretions and er frailties, would like to take you for his wife.”

Flora felt a sudden sickness well up in her stomach and she had a great desire to retch. The thought of physical contact with this man left her feeling faint. She knew he was a widower. His sickly and browbeaten wife had died childless nearly two years previously. In their church, it was considered shameful not to provide children for the next generation of the Brotherhood and Flora could see clearly what Eli’s intentions were. She realised that her father was still speaking to her.

“You know, daughter, that in our congregation it is considered a great honour for an older man to wed a younger woman. He can then instruct her in the ways of our Lord and curb her excesses.”

Flora knew that there had been talk of beatings and punishments in his household. Normally, what went on behind closed doors was of no concern to anyone else, but the crying and shouting that had disturbed the tranquillity of the community’s life had led to murmurings and quiet words of ‘advice’.

“We are going to leave you and Eli to talk alone now, daughter.” Flora pleaded with her eyes as her mother and father rose from the table, but her anguished looks were ignored.

“Listen carefully to what Brother Eli has to say and be guided by his wisdom and experience.”

Her parents left the room and Flora found herself alone in the chilling presence of Eli Krautz. He played with his wine glass, his stubby white hands gliding up and down the glass stem. When he spoke, it was to the opposite wall.

“You are young and I imagine you are fertile. That is good. If I am to be leader of this community - and I will be - I need children to follow in my name. It will be an honour for you to be my wife but I will expect you to perform your duties as a wife with the utmost diligence.”

Flora felt a shudder run down her spine and she fought to stifle a scream.

“You will obey me at all times. Especially, you will obey me in the bedroom. Being a virgin and being naïve, you will encounter some things that may not be to your liking and may seem, how shall I say, unholy.”

Flora noticed that he was speaking more quickly now and his breathing was getting deeper.

“Within marriage, everything is acceptable and it is ordained that you will accommodate the desires of your husband – whatever they may be.”

Now he had turned towards her and was leaning forward. She could see that his eyes were opaque and bloodshot.

“When I penetrate you it will be for the glory of our church. When I sow my seed, it will be for the honour of our founding fathers.”

Now he had raised himself from the table and was lurching forward. Flora leapt to her feet and grabbed hold of one of the rickety wood chairs, letting out a stifled

scream as she tried to create a barrier between herself and the advancing spectre. He didn't seem to notice. His eyes were distant and unseeing.

“When I take you ...”

Suddenly he was clutching at his chest and emitting a croaking sound from his throat. Froth started to bubble from the sides of his mouth. Flora was transfixed and unable to move. He clutched at the table with one hand and stretched out his other arm towards her. She made no move. Their eyes met briefly and she saw panic and fear within his. She felt suddenly removed and calm, as if she was disembodied from the scene that was playing out before her. He fell to the floor still gripping his chest. Flora knew that she should call for help but a stronger force held her back. She had been told all her life that God had ordained our lives to be led as he wished. Then this was his will. She would place her trust in him and not intervene.

She watched his final jerking movements as he lay on the floor. Instead of feeling weak and vulnerable, she felt a new strength invade her body. It was time to take control of her life and stop being the eternal victim. She had to leave this place and soon.

She took a deep breath and then let out a scream, shouting loudly for help as she rushed to the door of the next door room where her parents were waiting to offer their congratulations to the happy couple.

Jed

It was a bright morning with a hint of frost on the ground as Jed set off on the two mile walk from Mount Farm to Frampton. He had travelled the distance many times before when he had attended the town school, but since his mother's illness his visits had been far less frequent. He had also lost contact with many of his friends there. When his mother was first diagnosed with consumption, neighbours and friends would call by to offer help, but the curt greeting they received from Jed's father soon reduced this flow to a trickle and finally it dried up altogether. For over a year Jed hardly left the house, bound by his mother's need for constant attention.

Now, as he made his way between hedgerows and smelt the familiar pungency of freshly ploughed Norfolk loam, he felt as if he was entering the town for the first time, seeing it with new eyes. As he reached the outskirts, low roofed workers cottages lined the road, each with evidence of some form of toil. Smoke billowed from the furnace of a smithy and across the road milk churns littered the path outside

a small dairy. Washing billowed in the wind by a laundry and a tethered cow lowed mournfully as it patiently waited its turn to enter the slaughterhouse.

Further into the town, the buildings were more substantial and imposing, housing the co operative bank, the doctor's surgery and the police station. All roads led to the market square. The buildings surrounding this were gothic in style and looked onto a central pavilion which had once served as the food market. Now, long since abandoned as a market, it housed a few benches which were usually occupied by the elderly men of the town, sitting and observing life unfold as it had done for centuries.

Today was market day and, as Jed entered the square, stall holders were busy selling a range of produce brought in from neighbouring farms and fresh fish from nearby Cromer. As he weaved his way through shoppers and stall holders, he recognised the faces of people he'd known from before his mother's illness but no one seemed to recognise him. He had the strangest feeling of being invisible.

He had to stop to get his bearings. At the far end of the market square, tucked in between two buildings was a narrow alley, known locally as Thresher's Cut. He made his way down this path until it opened out onto a small courtyard surrounded by stone buildings. The taller buildings were used as store houses and rope pulleys swung from first floor landings. Between the taller buildings were a few single story thatched workshops which predated the store houses. Jed made his way towards one of these.

Inside, he felt immediately at ease as he recognised a scene which hadn't changed in the years he'd been absent. By the window which overlooked the courtyard, was a large work bench made from rough hewn oak. Its many indentations and gouged scars were evidence of years of creative toil. On wooden racks attached to the wall by the side of the table were artisans' tools – chisels, files, wood planes and numerous hand saws. From the wooden rafters hung a profusion of additional tools and implements, some of which looked as if they'd last seen service in the Middle Ages.

Jed picked up one of the chisels and ran his fingers down the metal shaft. It brought him pleasure to handle an instrument with which he could create something useful and lasting. Jed's deliberations were halted by a gravelly voice calling out from the back room.

“Who's that out there? Is you wantin' somethin'?”

Jed recognised the voice of Daniel.

“It's me, Jed Carter.”

“Who?”

“Jed Carter. I used to help out here.”

Daniel came into sight, emerging from the gloom of the backroom. He looked older than Jed recollected. He was small and very slightly hunched. His body showed signs of having once been powerful but the muscles had long since given way to a fat belly which gave him a rounded and benign appearance.

“Well, blow me - Jed Carter. I thought you’d gone – left the village. Folks said there was trouble up at your place and you’d all left.”

“No, it weren’t like that.”

Jed placed the chisel on the work bench and struggled to find words to explain his situation.

“You see, my Ma got very ill and I had to look after her. There was no one else to do it. Pa and Tom were busy on the farm and looking after Ma was left to me. I tried to get word to you.”

“I heard nothin’,” replied Dan, with a hint of indignation. “One day you was here and the next you was gone. I would ‘ave come looking but folks said you’d left.”

“I’m real sorry, Dan, but they wouldn’t let me out. Ma needed seeing to all the time – you know, bed pans and all that.”

“That doesn’t seem right, a youngster like you having to nurse his mother.”

“It wasn’t good. I seen things and had to do things I don’t care to talk about.”

“Weren’t there no one to help you, neighbours, that sort of thing?”

“You know what it’s like round here. Mind your own business and keep yourself to yourself. And my Pa and Tom didn’t help. Anyone come a knockin’ at the door and they’d send ‘em packin’.”

There was a prolonged silence as Dan digested this news. Jed allowed his eyes to scan the workshop shelves, taking in boxes of rusty nails, assorted chair legs and misshapen knives. He felt his spirits begin to rise, surrounded by these implements which enabled people like Dan to create order and structure from simple raw materials.

“So what’s brought you back then?” enquired Dan at last.

“My Ma died a year ago and since then I’ve just been left to myself.”

“Why aren’t you helping out on the farm then?”

“I tried but it just ain’t working out. I don’t fit in.”

“Why’s that?”

“The place is dead since Ma and Matt has gone. Matt were the life and soul of the place. You should have seen my Ma’s eyes light up when he was around. He told her stories that made her laugh and got up to pranks that took her breath away. An’ you could see Pa loved him too. He didn’t say much but you could see it in his eyes. Now they’ve gone the place is like a morgue. Pa and Tom work together and no one seems to know I exist - or even cares.”

Dan sat down heavily on an old sea chest that served as a seat.

“Well, I care young Jed. I done my fair share of being alone and I know it ain’t good. We all need to belong and we all need some purpose. Have you had any thoughts about what you want to do?”

“I was brought up to do farming and I ain’t trained for anything else. But I love this place, all them tools and that lathe over there. I like making things. I think I’d like to build things, houses, cabinets, chairs – anything.”

Dan rubbed his beard thoughtfully and scratched his ample stomach as he pondered Jed’s situation.

“Well, it seems to me, young Jed, there ain’t no choice. How about you come and work for me again and learn yourself a proper trade. My arthritis stops me doing all the things I need to do an’ I need a pair of young hands to help me.”

Jed’s face was transformed from desolation to ecstasy. It was the outcome he’d hoped for but hardly dared believe might happen.

“I don’t know what to say. I mean yes – yes. It’s what I want. You’re a real friend, Dan.”

“I can only pay you a small wage, mind. If you wants you can sleep overnight in the loft. Saves you having to go back each night when we’re working late.”

“I’ll work for a pittance and I’ll work real hard and learn from you and ...”

“So be it,” said Dan, interrupting Jed’s torrent of gratitude.

“Just you mind you don’t go runnin’ off again like last time. Now how about you beginning by fetching me a mug of tea. I like it real dark, mind, with five big spoons of sugar.”

Jack

Jack rearranged the papers on his desk once more. Behind him, the factory was visible on the other side of the glass panelled door. The low hum of machinery provided a

constant background to any conversation. The volume rose suddenly as the office door opened.

“Good news, Jack. We’ll meet the target this week. Ten machines completed by the end of today.”

The young factory manager was in his mid twenties, conventional save for the wooden peg leg that replaced the one he had been born with.

“Thanks, Adam. That’s good work. Have they all been tested?”

“All but the last one. That’s just going on the test rig now.”

“Good. I’d like that to be on the rig when I show this fellow round. He should be here shortly. I’ll have a chat to him, then give him a brief tour.”

“Right. We’d better get the place tidied up a bit.”

The factory manager left, leaving Jack waiting for the visitor. A sudden fit of coughing forced him to sit down at his desk and hold onto his chair for support. The words of his doctor were still ringing in head. It was only two days since he’d been summoned to the surgery to receive the results of hospital tests.

“The news isn’t good, Jack,” announced his doctor, reclining into a deep leather chair. “It’s the mustard gas that’s really done the harm to your lungs and it’s damaged the linings of your bronchial tubes too. All this coughing and straining is putting huge pressure on your heart and it’s getting weak. Then that beating you took has weakened you too. Basically, your body is showing signs of giving up.”

“So what are you saying?” enquired Jack, nervously. “What treatment are you suggesting?”

“There isn’t any treatment. Your condition is chronic. I’m afraid you’ve got five years at the most – three if you stay here in London. You need to get out of the city, away from the smog. Find somewhere near the seaside and enjoy what time’s left to you.”

Sitting at his office desk, Jack tried to compose himself before his visitor arrived. He had returned to the family business at the end of the war making sewing machines for the tailoring trade in the east end of London. His father had started the company in 1883 after he and his French wife had arrived in London as refugees from Russia. It had been modestly successful and Jack’s brother had been destined to inherit the factory on his return from war, but like so many other young men he became another victim of the slaughter in the trenches of northern France and the business passed to Jack.

Jack's war had ended in late November 1917 when he was rescued, half dead, from a German interrogation centre. It took six months for him to convalesce and though the physical scars healed, the mental scars would trouble him for the rest of his life. Determined to put the war behind him, he put all his efforts into rescuing what had by then become a failing business. Using skills learned in the army, he experimented with attaching electric motors to sewing machines instead of the traditional foot pedal. The idea proved successful and their fortunes began to revive but Jack soon realised he needed investment to make the business secure. Other rival companies were offering similar innovations and scale was the answer to keeping prices competitive.

Now, with the news that his life expectancy was five years at the most, carrying on with the business seemed futile. He had to get away – do something different for these final years. That's why this meeting was so important. He unfolded the letter again and re read the contents. It was from a Mr. Grant P. Hoester, Chief Executive Officer of Deltic Sewing Machines of Chicago. It read:

Dear Mr. Malikov,

Deltic Sewing Machines of Chicago intends to launch a new range of electric driven models into the UK. Having researched the market in your country, we have decided that our preferred policy would be to buy a British company and develop an existing product. We have conducted exhaustive tests on the S104 model made by your company and are very impressed with the performance and durability. We would like to arrange a convenient date for our agent in the UK, Mr. Alec Morgan, to meet with you and discuss the potential for a sale.

Jack knew the rest of the letter by heart – he had read it many times. He stood up from the desk and looked out of the soot-stained window. A dank mist clung to the buildings and pavements, making it difficult to determine exact shapes – ‘five years at the most, three if he stayed in London.’

He would do as the doctor had suggested, go to the coast, maybe buy a small place with the proceeds of the sale. The sea air would be good. Perhaps he could even cheat death a little longer.