

Chapter One

Swindon, Wiltshire: March 1910

Mattie Willitt started clearing away the pudding plates after tea, longing for the evening to end. Her stepfather was in a strange mood and when he was like that, she and her two half-sisters tried to keep away from him because it always meant trouble – always.

Bart jabbed one finger in her direction. ‘Leave those for later. I’ve something to tell you.’

She put the dishes down and came back to the table, clasping her hands in her lap and waiting, her nerves on edge.

He leant back, thumbs hooked in his wide leather belt, enjoying keeping them all waiting. Just as she thought she could bear the suspense no longer, he leant forward.

‘Our Mattie’s getting married,’ he announced. All three of them goggled at him.

‘First I’ve heard of it,’ she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

‘Because I’ve only just agreed to it. Stan Telfor’s been on at me about it for weeks, though.’

‘*Stan Telfor!*’ The words were out before Mattie could stop herself. The man was a younger version of Bart, better looking but just as strong – and equally frightening, as far as a small woman like herself was concerned. She’d never marry a man like him. But she managed to bite back an angry refusal and say casually, ‘Why would I want to marry him or anyone? I’m happy here looking after you three.’ But she was only staying until her sisters were old enough to escape her stepfather’s clutches. She’d promised herself that.

‘You’ll marry him because it suits me, and because for some reason he’s got it into his head that he fancies you.’ Bart studied her, head on one side. ‘He thinks you’re pretty. Me, I like women with more meat on their bones, and I’m not fond of foxy-coloured hair, neither. There’s no accounting for taste.’

‘I’m surprised you agreed to it.’

He grinned and rubbed his forefinger and thumb together. ‘Money’s a great persuader.’

‘You sold me.’ Anger seethed behind her quiet words. She hoped it didn’t show.

‘Aye. I’ve give you a home all these years, for your mother’s sake, but you’re no kin of mine.’

About time I got some payment for it. Nell's old enough now to take over the housekeeping. It's a daughter's duty to look after her father. So me and Stan have arranged to have the first banns called next Sunday.'

She closed her eyes to hide the fury. Bart had not even considered whether she wanted to marry Stan, just seen a chance to make some money and taken it. He'd do anything for money, her stepfather would.

If she refused, he'd beat her senseless to force her to obey him. He'd done it once before when she fell in love and wanted to get married. She'd held out against him till he'd threatened to beat her sisters next and sent Renie, the littlest, flying across the room with one backhand. She'd known it was hopeless then.

He heaved himself to his feet. 'I'll go and tell Stan you've accepted him.' He chuckled, a wheezing, chesty sound, then spat into the fire.

Filthy devil! she thought. *I hate you, Bart Fuller.*

When he'd left for the pub, her other sister Nell asked in a whisper, as if afraid he might still overhear, 'You're not going to marry that Stan, are you?'

Mattie shook her head.

'What *are* you going to do?'

'I've not worked it out yet.' She hesitated. 'I

saw you talking to Cliff Greenhill today, Nell. You love him, don't you?

Her stepsister looked at her warily then nodded.

'Has he asked you to marry him?'

Nell smiled, such a soft, happy smile that Mattie felt a pang of jealousy. 'Yes.'

'Your father won't let you.'

'I know. Me and Cliff have talked about that. He's got a good job at the railway works, been there since he was fifteen, did his apprenticeship as a carriage upholsterer. He doesn't want to leave. He's set for life if he stays.'

'If he stays, you can't marry him. Dad would beat him senseless if he tried, maybe cripple him.'

Nell flushed and said in a low voice, 'We have to marry. I'm expecting. It's just – we don't know how to manage it.'

'I'd guessed already about the baby. I've been waiting for you to tell me.'

'Cliff says we could have Renie to live with us after we're married, because he knows what Dad's like, but not both of you.'

Mattie stared at her thoughtfully. 'Did he really mean it?' She didn't need to ask why he didn't want her, because she knew. Soft-hearted Nell would let her take charge. Mattie wouldn't mean to, but she was the oldest, as much a mother as a sister, used to telling the others what to do.

And Cliff would want to be master in his own home, with his wife as mistress, a woman bound to do as he told her. Well, most men wanted that, didn't they?

Renie stared at them both, open-mouthed.

'You'll have to run away. You've no choice now because I'm leaving, and the sooner the better. Go and see Cliff tonight. Your father won't be back from the pub for an hour at least.' She rubbed her head, which was aching. 'I'm going upstairs. I'm tired today. You keep the fire going, Renie.'

As she got into bed, enjoying a rare moment or two of privacy in the room she shared with her sisters, Mattie thought again of the way her stepfather had sold her like a dumb beast. How much was she worth? Five pounds? Ten? Twenty even?

She didn't cry. She was a long way beyond tears now.

Could she do it? Dare she help her sisters to run away from him, then run away herself?

She had to, and do it carefully, whatever it took. She'd only get one chance of freedom, she was quite sure of that. So would they.

The next morning Mattie woke up with a heavy cold, one of the worst she'd ever had. It wasn't flu, mustn't be flu. Nothing must stop her getting away. When the others had gone to work she

struggled to do the housework, but had to sit down for a rest. Later she went to the corner shop, where she helped out for a couple of hours in the middle of the day, but had to come home again and lie down because she was simply too dizzy to stand up.

She fell into a heavy sleep and didn't wake until the door banged as her stepfather got home from work. When he found nothing ready for tea, he yelled up the stairs for her. She tried to sit up but her head spun. She tried to answer him but only a croak came out.

He came pounding up the stairs, took one look at her and backed away, whipping out his handkerchief and pressing it to his nose.

'Got a cold,' she whispered. 'Feel dizzy.'

'Yer as white as them sheets. You'll have to sleep down in the front room or you'll be giving it to your sisters. Of all the stupid times to get sick! What's Stan going to say?'

'Sorry about . . . tea.'

'We'll buy some fish and chips.'

'Not . . . for me. I'm not hungry.'

He shrugged and went back downstairs. After a few moments, she got up and took some bedding downstairs to the front room, huddling on the sofa. He didn't offer to bring her a hot drink or light a fire in here, and she didn't ask, though she was shivering now and desperately thirsty. She

huddled down, dreaming of escaping, of never seeing *him* again.

What sort of life was this? Her mother would have been horrified. Jane Willitt had married Bart because she was lonely. He'd been a fine figure of a man in those days before he'd run to fat. And give him his due, he'd treated her mother nicely when they were courting and first married, been fond of her in his own way. But it had been a big step down in the world for the widow of a schoolteacher, daughter of a clergyman, to marry a man like him, as they'd found out.

He'd deceived them about his prospects at the railway works in Swindon. No one was going to make Bart Fuller a foreman, because he was too aggressive, couldn't manage men, only bully them. That lack of success at work had soured him. As for his fancy wife, she'd given him only daughters, then up and died on him, leaving him to raise them with the help of a fourteen-year-old girl.

Mattie sighed and snuggled down, trying to get warm. What use was it to go over the past? It was the future which mattered now. Much as she loved her sisters, she wasn't going to tie herself to a man like Stan Telfor to keep the peace. And anyway, Nell needed to get away now as well.

No, it was definitely time to leave. The freedom she'd dreamt of for so long was close.

It was a relief when her sisters came home from work. Nell brought her a cup of tea while Renie got permission from her father to light a fire in the front room.

‘How did you persuade him to let me have a fire?’ Mattie whispered.

‘Told him you might die of pneumonia if we didn’t keep you warm, then he’d lose his money.’

‘Have you seen Cliff?’

Nell nodded and moved closer, speaking in a low voice and keeping an eye on the door. ‘We were going to leave on Friday, after he gets paid, but we’ll have to put off our escape till next week. You’re not fit to go anywhere.’

‘No! We have to leave this week.’ Mattie began coughing but when the bout was over she grasped Nell’s arm. ‘We’ll talk after he’s gone to the pub.’

It seemed at first as if her stepfather was going to stay in, because it was raining heavily. But after fidgeting round the kitchen for a while, he went to peer out of the back door, then came back and got his coat and hat. ‘It’s not raining so hard now. I’m off to wet my whistle. Don’t let anyone in while I’m away.’

He said this every time he went out. Who did he think would want to come and visit his house? Mattie often wondered. He never invited anyone, or made neighbours welcome if they popped in, had no relatives he bothered with and preferred

to spend most evenings in the bright warmth of the Fettler's Arms.

After he'd left, the three of them gathered in the front room and Mattie pulled herself into a sitting position, ignoring the way her head spun.

'You'll not be fit to go anywhere,' Nell said again.

'We have to do it this week. I don't want to go round to Stan's house after church on Sunday. You know what he'll expect.' Her stepfather had winked, as he made it plain that she was to 'be nice to' Stan.

No, whether she was better or not, she was leaving as planned. Stan Telfor wasn't going to have his way with her. They'd only get one chance to escape. She wasn't losing it.

Jacob Kemble knelt to plant some seedlings, a task he loved because you could think as you worked. He looked round in satisfaction. Turning the small farm his father had left him into a market garden had made all the difference and he wasn't short of a penny now, even though this bit of land would never make him rich.

What he was short of was . . . oh, he didn't know. Companionship was the nearest he could come to it, someone to work alongside him and raise his children, someone to talk to in the evenings. And a wife to look after his house. Even

with the help of a woman from the village, he was making a poor fist of it, he knew.

But he wasn't going to make another marriage of convenience. Alice had been a decent soul, a hard-working wife, especially in the early years, because she too loved being out of doors. It hadn't been enough, though. She hadn't been a good companion for a thinking man, because she'd not been interested in anything beyond her home and family. In fact, she'd bored him, though he felt guilty every time he admitted that to himself.

He hadn't realised how much Alice had helped him around the place, though, until he had to manage without her. Images flashed through his mind as they did every time he thought of the accident. A horse had unseated its rider during a hunt a few fields away. He'd learnt later that the man had been whipping it and caught it in one eye. It had run away and leapt a hedge, crashing into their little cart and sending Alice flying like a rag doll.

They'd had to put the horse down, it'd been screaming in agony. His wife hadn't screamed. She'd died before he could even pull himself out of the wreckage and across to her. He'd broken his leg, which had left him with a permanent limp. It wasn't a bad limp, but it did slow him down a bit and ached sometimes if he overdid things.

As he stood up to ease his back, he saw Miss

Newington leaving the big house. She came to the gates, stood staring down the hill and when she saw him, waved and set off towards him.

He hurried across to the bucket to wash the worst of the dirt off his hands and dried them on his trousers for lack of a towel. Miss Newington was quite elderly, so couldn't walk fast, but she liked to get out and about and he always enjoyed a chat with her. He suspected that she was even lonelier than he was.

She waited for him to open the gate for her, then said in her abrupt way, 'I want to talk to you, Kemble.'

'Would you like to come inside and sit down, miss?'

'No. I'd rather sit on that bench of yours. They say there's rain on the way, so we don't want to waste this beautiful sunshine, do we?'

He waited till she'd sat down, then obeyed a wave of her hand and joined her on the bench.

'Now that Hillman's dead, I'm going to need someone to collect my rents from the village and oversee the small repairs. Are you interested in the job?'

He didn't hesitate. 'I certainly am.'

'Think you can handle it? They do try to get out of paying. And then there are the accounts to keep.'

'I'm good at figures, take after my mother

there, and I'll know who can pay and who can't.'

'The job's yours, then. Five per cent, you'll keep, like Hillman did. Come up to the house this evening and I'll pass on the paperwork.' She stared across his main field. 'Your crops look to be doing well.'

'They are, but they'll be better still for a drop of rain.' He looked up at the sky. No clouds yet, but he could sense the rain coming.

'My rheumatism tells me they'll get more than a drop.' She eased herself to her feet.

He didn't try to help her, because she was fiercely independent. She'd had to be to take over a run-down house at her age. No one had expected her to inherit. The estate had been sold off piece by piece by the last owner, who hadn't cared about it after his only child, the son and heir, had been killed in the Boer War.

Every house in the village had tied a black bow to their front door when that happened and kept their curtains drawn as a sign of respect. The landowner hadn't been seen for months after the funeral, then he'd emerged from his drinking bouts a changed man, bitter and uncaring about his tenants' welfare.

He'd not left the house to his nephew, a sharp man who lived in the next village, but to his niece, who had moved away with the rest of his youngest brother's family when she was in her teens. Her

inheriting had surprised everyone. They'd been even more surprised when she didn't sell the place to her cousin, because everyone knew Arthur Newington had expected to inherit and was eager to set himself up at the hall.

You never knew what life would bring you, Jacob mused.

He and Alice had had such plans for improving this land and making it into a thriving market garden, selling quality produce at higher prices to the best greengrocers' shops in nearby towns. In that, at least, they'd been compatible. But he couldn't seem to think straight since the accident, had just carried on as best he could with the one field under cultivation and the others rented out for the grazing.

He really should take one of the fields back and put it to better use. But it was all he could do at the moment to tend this one and look after his children. His eyes lifted to the cherry trees that bordered the lane. They were just coming into bloom, the mass of pale-pink blossom so beautiful he looked forward to seeing it every spring.

He really must pull himself together now that he'd got the rent-collecting job. The money would make a big difference, allow him to put something by for the future, and hire better help in the house.

Collecting village rents was only part of the

work Hillman had done, because Miss Newington had a few properties in nearby Wootton Bassett. He wondered who was looking after them for her. A shrewd lady, Miss Newington, and well liked in the village, for all her outspoken ways.

It was willpower that got Mattie up and moving round the house on the Thursday morning, but she didn't go to work. She kept telling herself it was the third day of this cold and everyone knew you were past the worst after three days, so tomorrow she'd be all right to leave – she had to be.

That evening her stepfather plonked the housekeeping money down on the table, as usual, hesitated, then added another shiny florin. 'Here's two bob extra. Better get yourself a lemon and some honey. You need to be well for Stan on Sunday. We're not letting him down.'

'Thanks.' Mattie scooped up the money and put it in her purse.

The following morning Bart went off to work as usual when the hooter sounded at the Works. It was so loud they said you could hear it from ten miles away, and it sounded not only to start the day, but to end it, too. Most able-bodied men in Swindon and the nearby villages hurried off to the Railway Works on its command; most housewives planned their days around it.

Nell and Renie got ready for their jobs in the

local laundry, both looking slightly plumper than usual because they were wearing as many clothes as they could.

Nell came running back to give Mattie a final hug. 'Are you sure you'll be all right?'

'Of course I will.' But Mattie's voice rasped and she could feel the phlegm rattling in her chest as she fought the urge to cough. 'We've got no choice, you know that.'

'I'm going to miss you.'

Mattie saw tears welling in both her sisters' eyes. 'None of that! Do you want to make people guess something's up?' she demanded sharply. 'We'll see one another again.'

'We won't even know where you are, or you us,' Nell said, sniffing and wiping away a tear. 'And you're still not well. I don't know how you're going to manage.'

'Cliff can write to his family in a year or two. I'll find out where you are from them.' She reached out to hold on to the table.

'You're still dizzy,' Renie protested. 'How can you possibly manage on your own?'

'I'll manage because I have to. I want to get away as much as you do. More. This is my only chance to escape marrying Stan.' She not only feared her stepfather's violence, but the way he might use her sisters again to persuade her to do what he wanted.

She packed as much as she could in a bundle and dressed in some old clothes she'd been keeping to tear up for cleaning rags, covering her head with a shawl they used to run out to the backyard privy. Today she wanted to look old and poor. But her red hair showed clearly still, so she got out the flour and rubbed it into the front. That was better.

Pulling the shawl low over her forehead, she practised hobbling along with a stoop and thought she was doing quite well. But she didn't try to leave the town. Not yet. She knew she was taking a big risk, but she couldn't, she just couldn't leave till she'd made sure her sisters had got away safely.

As the fingers on the big station clock twitched their way towards nine o'clock, she stood across from the station, leaning against the wall in a little alley. She watched as Nell and Renie arrived, hurrying into the station by the side entrance. Nell had been going to pretend they had a dying relative and needed to visit her.

Where was Cliff, though?

The station clock ticked the minutes off and Mattie waited, getting more and more anxious. What were the others going to do if Cliff changed his mind at the last minute? They hadn't even got the money for fares, because their father took everything they earned.

With only three minutes to go till the train

left, Cliff came running down the street, carrying an old suitcase. She closed her eyes for a minute in shuddering relief and when she opened them, she saw him at the ticket window, pushing some money across. He ran towards the platform and out of her sight.

She waited in the alley till the train left in a cloud of steam and even then she had to go across and check that her sisters weren't still standing on the platform.

To her horror she met a neighbour coming out of the station, but the woman didn't seem to recognise her and simply walked past. Had she seen Renie and Nell?

Feeling faint with relief that they'd got away safely, Mattie turned and went across to the tram stop. She spent some of her precious coins to go to the end of the line, heading south-eastwards. Then she began walking towards Wootton Bassett, thinking of making her way to Bath eventually. She couldn't afford to spend any more on fares, not if she wanted to eat. She wasn't sure how she would earn a living, but surely something would turn up? She was a hard worker, and wouldn't mind what she did.

If only it would stop raining! She was soaked already and it was hard moving against the driving rain coming in from the west. She felt to be burning up with fever one minute and

shivering with cold the next. Every now and then she was forced to stop and rest, because she felt so weak, but fear of what would happen if Bart caught her made her summon up the strength to trudge on.

As she was taking a rest on a stone by the side of the road, a man in a trap stopped to ask, 'Are you all right?'

'Just a bit tired, thank you, sir.'

'Are you going far?'

'Bath,' she said. 'To my brother's. But I've not got the money to go by train.'

'That's a long way to walk.'

She nodded.

'I can give you a ride for a few miles, if you want.'

Unable to believe her luck, for a minute she couldn't speak, then she gasped. 'Thank you. Oh, bless you for that, sir.'

'Hop up.'

The struggle to haul herself up left her breathless.

He eyed her pityingly. 'You're not well. You shouldn't be out in weather like this.'

'I don't have any choice. I'm really grateful for your help.'

It seemed only a few minutes before he set her down again, but she felt it was an omen, because it had moved her on more than she could possibly

have managed on foot, even if she wasn't ill, which would surely put them off the scent if they came after her.

She was going to get away, just like her sisters, she told herself, her spirits lifting. She was going to do it. Why, even the rain had stopped. She looked up at the sky and her heart sank. More dark clouds were massing in the west. It'd not be fine for long.

She lost all sense of time, but later it started to pelt down and she stood under a tree for a while, shivering as she sheltered. But the rain had clearly set in and she couldn't stand here all day. She was still much too close to Swindon, so had to keep moving.

She was soaked to the skin and her shoes squelched as she walked, which made her smile grimly. If she died of pneumonia, she'd definitely get away from him.

After a while she found herself talking aloud and stopped in dismay, trying to pull herself together. But soon she found herself muttering again. 'Just a few more steps, just a few more steps.' It helped to walk to the rhythm of those words, so she gave up trying to keep quiet. There was no one to hear her because no one else was mad enough to be out in such a storm.

Time passed in a blur and she found herself sitting on a bench under a tree without the faintest

idea of how long she'd been there, then resting in the lee of a wall overhung by a tall bush. Her clothes were dripping water, her bundle too.

She wasn't sure where she was when night started to fall. She seemed to have left the main road and taken a side road, but that was probably a good thing, because *he* wouldn't know where she'd turned off the main road, even if he traced her this far.

'Find a barn,' she muttered. 'Got to . . . find a barn. Got to . . . stop for the night.' Darkness had fallen now and she was shivering continuously, her hands and feet feeling like blocks of ice. She had some bread and cheese in her bundle. It'd be soggy, but you could still eat it if you were hungry, only she wasn't. She had the housekeeping money to buy more food with and water was free in any stream. She was managing. Just. But oh, she felt so weary and so cold.

Surely there should be houses nearby? She looked ahead for lights but saw none. She'd slowed right down now, could only stagger a few steps, stop, stagger on again.

Then, just as she was thinking she couldn't force herself to take one more step, she saw it – a light shining in the distance, slightly to the right, and a lane that turned in that direction. A few steps more and she could see what looked like the lights of a village down a lane to the left, but

they were further away than the first light, so she headed for that.

A few steps, then stop. A few more steps. She stumbled and fell, lay for a minute or two with rain beating down on her in the darkness. Dragging herself up on her knees, she summoned up the strength to get to her feet and staggered on.

When she fell again, she couldn't get up or even find the breath to call for help. Darkness wrapped itself around her, sucking her down into a big hole.

I'm dying, she thought, and was too exhausted to care.