



*When Midnight Comes*

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# *Chapter One*

*Camden, London 1856*

‘But my dad’s funeral isn’t until Friday.’ Chrissie Banner looked at the rent collector in dismay. ‘Can’t I stay until that’s over?’

Jack Porter’s heart ached for the young girl in front of him. What he had been told to do was cruel, but he was lucky to have a job. There were plenty more waiting and willing to take over from him. He needed this job. ‘I’m sorry, but the landlord has tenants waiting to move in and he wants you out by tomorrow.’

‘Has he got a heart?’ she asked with a grim smile on her tired face. ‘Dad never once got behind with the rent and I’ve kept the place clean and free from bugs. That ain’t easy in this slum.’

‘You’re a good girl.’ Jack’s mind was working quickly, trying to find a way to help this girl he had come to like and respect. Whenever he came to collect the rent it was always handed over with a smile. Her mum had died some years ago and then a couple of months ago her dad became ill and couldn’t work. He knew it had been a struggle for her, but she had never complained.

‘Could I stay if I paid for the next four days?’

He knew the landlord was only interested in money, so he nodded. ‘That would be all right, but can you afford it? I know you haven’t been able to do the rounds with your dad so ill.’

She shrugged. Poverty was a way of life to her, but it was no good crumbling under the strain. Her dad always said she was a survivor and she hoped he was right. ‘How much would that old skinflint of a landlord want?’

Jack studied his book. ‘Sixpence.’

Hiding her distress she drew out some coins from her pocket, reluctant to part with her last few pence, but there wasn’t any choice. She had been hoping the landlord would let her stay for a few extra days as they had been good tenants, but that was too much to ask. She handed over the coins and replaced the last remaining one back in her pocket.

‘How are you going to manage?’ he asked as he reluctantly took the money from her.

‘I’ll have to sell the horse and cart.’ Her eyes misted with tears at the thought. Dear old Bessie had been with them for a long time and it would be hard to part with the faithful horse. ‘Bob, down the street, is interested in taking over the round, and I know he’ll treat Bessie kindly.’

‘But you and your dad are well known in this area, and you’re a strong girl so I thought you would carry on with the rag-and-bone business.’ Jack was dismayed.

‘How can I? What do I do – leave Bessie in the street and sleep in the cart?’ She shook her head. ‘The dear animal deserves better than that.’

‘So do you,’ he said gently. How he hated this job, but

it was all he could get, and he was lucky to have it. At least he could feed his family, which was more than some of the poor devils round here could do. ‘What are you planning to do?’

‘I need a roof over my head and food in my stomach, so I’ll have to go into service, I suppose.’ She gazed along the street of slum houses and her mouth set in a determined line. ‘I’ve got the chance of a new start so I ain’t staying in this disgusting place. If I have to scrub floors, then I’ll do that to earn some money, and then I’m gonna find somewhere in the country where there are trees and open spaces round me.’

‘I wish you luck with that, but you be careful.’

Her smile lit up her weary face, and her dark eyes flickered with amusement. ‘Don’t you worry about me. I’m taller and stronger than a lot of men. I can take care of myself.’

He nodded. ‘I’ll be at your dad’s funeral.’

‘Thanks. I’d like him to have a good send-off.’ Her mind went back to the man she had loved so much. He had come from Romany Travellers stock, but after marrying a girl outside of the group, he had settled down in one place and started the rag-and-bone round. He had been a good man, and she was going to miss him so much.

She went to the yard and gave Bessie the last of the feed she had left. After paying for the extra days’ rent there wasn’t anything left to buy more, and it was no good putting things off, she thought sadly. She would have to go and see Bob. Of course, she wasn’t going to get much for Bessie and the round because he didn’t have any money. Jobs were hard to come by for the likes of

them, but at least he would be able to feed his family if he took over her dad's business. They'd always managed until he had become too ill to work. She took Bessie and the cart out now and again, but never seemed to do well. Not like her dad. He had a voice that could be heard several streets away, and he was well liked. She gave the animal a pat on the rump and headed for Bob's house just three doors down.

He'd seen her coming and was waiting, worry etched on his face. 'Saw the rent man at your place. Are they turning you out, lass?'

'Yes. They wanted me out before the funeral, but I couldn't have that, so I had to pay for a few days extra.'

'Our landlord is a bloody disgrace!' he declared angrily. 'You've got your dad in his coffin there, so what the hell did he think you was gonna do with him until the funeral?'

She shrugged. 'He's an unfeeling sod, but Jack was kind. You could see he didn't like doing it, but it's his job and he has to do as he's told.'

'Of course, and he can't risk being sacked.' He looked hopefully at the tall girl in front of him. 'You made up your mind, Chrissie?'

'Yes, you can take over from Dad. Come and get the horse and cart whenever you like. I've just given her a feed. I know you ain't got much, but can you give me anything?' When she saw the worry on his face, she said quickly, 'If you ain't got nothing then that's all right. I understand.'

'All I can rake together is sixpence, but once I get going I'll give you a bit more.'

'No, you keep that to feed the kids. I don't want

nothing, and Dad wanted you to have the round. Just take good care of Bessie and I'll be happy.'

'I'll do that, lass, and thanks. What are you going to do? Have you got family you can go to?'

'No, I'm on my own now.' She gave a strained smile. 'I'll be all right, though. I'm gonna get away from here and make a new life for myself. I've got to earn some money first, but then I'm heading for the country. There's bound to be posh houses there where I can get a job.'

'I hope it works out for you. Will you write and let us know how you're getting on?'

'I'll do that.'

'We'll all be at the funeral. I'll come and get Bessie and the cart right now, if that's all right. Her shed's all ready and nice and comfy. I'll go out today and see if I can pick up anything.'

'Good idea. She'll enjoy an outing.'

Chrissie kept away from the yard, but knew the animal had gone when she heard Bob shouting, 'Rag an' bone!' With tears streaming down her face she went and cleared out the shed and swept the yard, telling herself off for being a sentimental fool. Handing her over to Bob had been necessary for the animal's sake. He was a kind man and would take good care of the horse. After all, his livelihood depended on her now.

Friday dawned a dull overcast day with a fine drizzle soaking everything. It was a depressing September day and Chrissie hoped it wouldn't keep people away. She wanted to do right for the dad she had loved, and it would be upsetting if only a few attended. She had been able to

pawn a couple of things to buy bread and put on a modest spread for after the funeral, and there were a few bottles of beer for the men.

The undertaker arrived to collect the coffin and she walked behind the horse-drawn cart to the church. People began to fall in behind her and by the time they reached the church there was such a large crowd that every pew was taken, with many standing at the back. This gave her some comfort and showed just how much her dad had been liked and respected.

The service went well and Chrissie was glad she had been able to scrape enough money together for what she considered to be a proper send-off for him. He'd had the penny insurance everyone took out no matter how poor they were, but it hadn't been enough to cover everything. It had left her broke, but as she looked round she felt it had been worth it. All the neighbours were there, so were his friends from the pub, as well as many who had known him from his rag-and-bone rounds.

Just about everyone came back and crowded into the small house and she worried that there wouldn't be enough food and drink for them all. While she was in the scullery boiling water to make the tea, the back door opened and she watched in amazement as one woman after another came in carrying a plate of something; when two men arrived from the pub with a barrel of beer, she couldn't help brushing away a tear. If her dad was watching from on high he would approve of this, and she could almost hear his amused chuckle.

It turned out to be quite a wake, with a real knees-up going on and spilling out in the street. The party didn't

break up until midnight, and after the last person had left she collapsed in a chair, exhausted. It was only then the realisation hit her that she was now alone and tomorrow she would be homeless. All the money she had left was tuppence and that wasn't going to get her far. The furniture belonged to the landlord so that couldn't be sold. Everything her dad had collected on his last round had been sold to help with the funeral costs, and they didn't have anything of value she could use to raise money. She wandered round the squalid house but there were only a few battered pots and pans, and Bob could have those. They might bring him in a few coppers.

She sat on the edge of the bed frightened about the future. What was she going to do?

When Chrissie opened her eyes she shot straight up in bed. It was light! What was she doing sleeping so late; there was such a lot to do. The first thing was to see to Bessie. Her hand was on the bedroom door when she stopped suddenly and looked down at herself. She was fully clothed. Then the memories flooded back and she gasped in pain. Her father was gone, Bessie was gone, and she had to get out of the house today. For a moment she nearly crumpled where she stood, but that couldn't be allowed to happen. Still holding on to the door for support, she took a deep breath to try and clear her mind. Be strong, she told herself. If you keep calm and think clearly you will get through this. Think of those open spaces and green fields you have always longed for. Keep that as your goal and you'll fight for it knowing your Romany heritage is calling you to a new life – grasp it. You're a survivor, remember.

In control of her emotions again she opened the door and made her way down the narrow staircase. There was work to be done this day, and as painful as that would be it had to be faced. Her first concern was money and she gathered together anything she could sell or pawn, but there wasn't much for they had never been ones for possessions. The only thing she had of value was his silver pocket watch and chain that had come down through the family, and that was something she hoped she would never have to part with, no matter how bad things became. The bedlinen could be pawned and she might get a few coppers for that. It was clean and in good condition, but that was about it. Her dad had been buried in his only good suit and Bob could have the rest of his old clothes.

After having a quick wash she packed her few belongings in a bag, then gathered up the other bits and pieces and headed along the road.

Bob's wife, Gladys, opened the door and reached out to help her with the things about to topple out of her arms. 'Thanks, Glad. I thought Bob might be able to use this lot.'

'I'm sure he could. He's getting the horse and cart ready to do a round this morning. Come in, ducky, and have a bit of breakfast with us. I don't suppose you've had anything to eat.'

'I haven't had time as I slept late,' she admitted. 'But I can't take your food.'

'Of course you can. Letting us have the round has given us hope for the future, and Bob's a different man already now he has a way to provide for his family.'

‘That’s right.’ He strode in to the scullery, followed by all six of his excited children.

‘We’ve been feeding Bessie and making her coat shine,’ the eldest told her proudly, ‘and I’m going with Dad so I can help.’

‘My goodness, she’ll love all that fuss,’ Chrissie replied, hiding her grief at losing the animal by giving the boy a bright smile. As she looked at the happy smiling faces around her she knew she had done the right thing. ‘I’ve brought you this. They ain’t worth much, but you might make use of them.’

The children swooped on them. ‘Can we put them on the cart, Dad?’

He smiled and nodded, and when they all disappeared, laughing and running down the yard, Bob turned to Chrissie. ‘I’ve made a little bit already, so I’ll give you sixpence for the lot.’

‘No.’ She held up her hands in horror. ‘Come on, I know what things are worth and it ain’t that much. I’ve got a few things to pawn, so I’ll be all right.’

‘You sure?’ He studied her carefully. ‘You ain’t lying to me, are you?’

‘Course not, I’ve got plans. I come from a line of Travellers, as you know, and I’m gonna live in the country as soon as I can. As soon as I’ve saved enough money I’m leaving all this behind.’

He still looked doubtful. ‘I don’t like the idea of you out there all on your own. If you can’t get a roof over your head by tonight you come back here. You can stay with us until you’re settled in a job.’

‘Thanks, but I’ll be all right.’ She gazed around this

already overcrowded hovel and knew she couldn't burden them like that.

'Promise you'll come back here,' he told her sternly, guessing her thoughts. 'We'll manage.'

She reached out and grasped his hand in gratitude and made the promise, knowing she wouldn't keep it. When she saw the concern leave his face she excused herself the lie.

'Do you want to see Bessie before you go?'

'Better not. She's settled in with you and the kids making a fuss of her, and it might disturb her. I said my goodbyes to her yesterday, now I'd better go. Jack will be coming for the keys and to inspect the house.'

'Keep in touch and let us know how you're getting on,' Bob called as she hurried away.

She turned and waved, and then ran to do a final tidy-up of the house before leaving it for the last time.