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FALLING CREATURES

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*For my sister, Lil, with whom I've climbed Roughtor many times
and who loves a good prison yarn*



PROLOGUE

The pony had given in by the time we found her. This was near the ford, halfway between Roughtor and Penhale. The marsh there was broad and very wet.

The creature had struggled, though, we could see that, for the grass was churned brown where she'd fought to stand. Her eyes were rolling white. Sweat was creamy on her shoulders. Her backside was sinking in the pit of mud and black water seeping. She was tired from the pain, from trying to get up. Her breath loud and rasping.

We stood safe at the marsh edge, where the grass was longer. I knew where a marsh started but that was because I was born on the moor. Charlotte was born by the sea. It made a difference, something like that.

Charlotte went to cross the marsh. I grabbed her. Harder than I meant to. She cried out.

'We can't help her,' I said.

The only sounds were the sucking of the water and the pony's hard breath.

'Look.' Charlotte pointed across the moor, towards Lanhendra. Ponies stood watching – four of them.

'They're waiting,' I said.

'For what?'

'Until she's dead. They won't leave her.'

The moor and its marshes were the only things that made Charlotte

Dymond afraid. She put her hand in mine and squeezed it. Her palms were hot, and rough as gorse. We were close as moor stone and the ground that held it.

Until someone uprooted us.

ONE

Charlotte Dymond gifted me blood-heat on the day we met. She took it from another living creature without any cutting. She carried no knife that I saw. She didn't need such a tool. Her workings were in her hands, then later the water. This I would have told the magistrates but they wouldn't hear truth. They would hear only lies.

Charlotte made me the gift at the hirings, at All Drunkard, a place so sinful it was called such even though its true name, as written on the tithe map, was All Worthy. My father had told me All Drunkard was the better name because the magistrates met there and they were drunkards all. He wanted rid of me. I knew he would leave me at the hirings like I knew he'd taken to spirits since my mother coughed her last. It was him deserved to be left at All Drunkard, not me.

To reach the hirings on that Lady Day in 1844 my father and I left our home in Blisland and went across the moor before it was light. My father caught me when I stumbled against moor stone or fell into hollows made by sheep and ponies. I didn't mind him not speaking. I had nothing to say and the wind was cold on my face though it was March and the days were lengthening.

When we came to All Drunkard there were crowds outside the inn. It was easy to make out the masters and mistresses from those looking to be hired because the farm servants had boots like mine, with thin soles and the leather ripped. Our clothes were thin too, clutched against the wind. My father went inside and left me with the horses standing in cart shafts. He didn't come back.

The wind came sharp off the moor and I had no shawl or gloves. I crept to a black carthorse, the creature tied furthest from the inn, and pressed myself into its coat. I was seventeen years of age and my mother had been dead a week. My sister hadn't come home for the burial. I hadn't seen her since I didn't know how long. She might have been in the ground herself.

'You'll not get much warmth from that bag of bones.'

I looked up from the carthorse's greasy hide. A woman stood before me. 'Better than nothing,' I said.

I thought I'd seen her before. But I knew I hadn't. She was the same height as me and had the same dark hair. She wore a fine dress, green, was it silk? And good shoes, with pattens to keep them from dirtying.

She pushed a strand of hair from her face and I felt my own hand move likewise though there was no hair across my face. I bit my lip and she did the same or was it the other way around? We smiled. We were close as moor stone.

'There's always something to be got from nothing,' she said, and she cupped her hands and held them out to me. Her nails were bitten to the quick so bad they were bloodied. There was a smell about her. Like bread caught in the hearth.

'See now,' she said, 'nothing here.'

Then she put her hands on the carthorse's rump, the fleshy part of its back leg. A quiver ran all through the creature, but the woman paid no mind to the horse's discomfort. She dug the heels of her hands into the horse, moving them in a circle, over and over, steady and the same. The horse tossed its head and tried to swing its backside away from her but it was like she held the horse where it stood. The creature made no sound. It had lost its tongue. I was wondering at this strangeness, for the horses I had known were quick to shriek their pain and then, oh then—

Her hands on my cheeks, as hot as if she'd cut the horse's neck and laid me down in its still beating blood. I felt the blood pour over me, soak me to my bones. The creature's heat was mine, its life was mine,

even as it stood breathing at my side. She made me warmer than I'd ever been in my life, warmer even than when the gorse was burnt on the moor for clearing ground and the whole world was blazing round me.

'Better now, aren't you?' she said.

'How did you—?'

She put her hands behind her back. The carthorse dipped a mite then remembered how to use its knees and stood straight. It tossed its head once more, coughed, and then there was just her looking at me.

'Quiet now,' this blood woman said. 'Don't you go telling.'

'But—'

'Girl!' a voice behind me called.

I turned to look. A stout old woman was waving at us.

'You not taken?' She reached us through the people and horses and carts and took hold of my arm to feel its strength. 'Scrap of a thing, dear me, yes.'

She wore black and her black hair was piled any old way. She said her name was Mrs Peter and she farmed at Penhale, a short way across the moor.

'You suited to farm work?' she asked me. 'Milking?'

'Yes,' the blood woman said.

The blood woman didn't look a farm servant to me. She was dressed too fine. Mrs Peter didn't see her as one either.

'You're looking for work?' Mrs Peter asked her.

'I can milk cows,' the blood woman said. 'Card wool. Cook and clean.'

She had a long face and large eyes. She looked hard at a person when she spoke to them, didn't look away. I wanted her to speak to me again.

'Well, I suppose I could take you pair,' Mrs Peter said, 'if you know the Good Lord's love.' She turned to me. 'What about you – you can milk cows?'

I wanted to be away from the inn, away from my father and the memory of my mother coughing, her pale face and her eyes no longer seeing me, and I wanted to be with the blood woman who had warmed me, so I said yes. I said yes to everything Mrs Peter asked until she said, 'Have you eaten?' and I shook my head.

‘John! John!’ she called.

A man lumbered over. He had the same small eyes as the woman, the same black hair escaping from his hat. He looked younger than my father, about thirty years of age. He could have been thought handsome were it not for the largeness of his mouth and nose. He looked about him like he was afraid of the crowds and the noise. This made me think he was slow. But Mrs Peter wasn’t.

‘John,’ Mrs Peter said, ‘get them something to eat while I find who they belong to.’

But he wasn’t listening. He was looking at the blood woman. His mouth fell open.

‘Did you hear me, John?’ Mrs Peter took hold of his chin and made him look at her. ‘Go and get them some bread.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ he said.

He started for the inn’s door. His steps were plodding as a cow’s and he kept looking back at us. At the blood woman.

‘Now then, give me your names,’ Mrs Peter said.

‘Charlotte Dymond,’ said the blood woman.

I told Mrs Peter my name.

‘Well that’s no use to me,’ she said. ‘We’ll have to find some way of telling you apart. Wait here. I won’t be long.’

She followed the man John into the inn, leaving just the two of us again, which was better. Then something moved in Charlotte Dymond’s hand. Something vanished up her sleeve. She caught me looking and folded her arms across her chest.

‘I can’t stand cows,’ she said.

I didn’t see my father again but I dreamt him drawing up the bond with Mrs Peter. I dreamt him making his mark and stinking of drink. There was no one to sign Charlotte away.