

The Proposal

Whitby has an abundance of inns and taverns. You can get inebriated in any one of them if you have a mind. Beyond the usual ale and porter, brandy and gin each one has its own distinct trademark, its own particular pleasure to offer.

The Angel is a coaching inn set right on Whitby quay. Any nob passing through the harbour town will stay at The Angel if they have any sense. The rooms are large and comfortable; some rooms even have picturesque views of the ruined abbey of St Hilda's across the water.

Then there's The Dolphin. Drop in if you're in the mood for a musical evening: sea shanties and songs of lost love and mermaids sung by sailors in various stages of drunkenness await your pleasure. The Buck Inn is the place if you fancy a spot of gambling, while the White Horse and Griffin is famed for storytelling so if you fancy a tall tale head for there. Of all the taverns the town boasts it's best to avoid The Board Inn unless you're fond of brawling that is. The Royal Hotel, high on West Cliff is more refined. Merchants, sea captains and the town's better off elements congregate here to talk business, strike deals and play faro.

And then there's The Fleece.

Stale ale and tobacco smoke, sawdust and sweat. And sailors, lots of sailors.

The Fleece, heading out of town - or heading in if you're coming from Scarborough - is just like the other inns of Whitby in that it has its regular clientele. It's the preferred inn if you like to play a friendly game of cards for low stakes or like to listen to a fiddle every now and then. It's a quieter type of tavern; the landlord keeps an orderly house generally speaking. That in itself is a draw for some Whitby residents.

Tonight the regulars at The Fleece are in their usual places. The old seadogs nurse their ale alongside their ailments, the rope makers and sail makers apprentices are hopefully shuffling the cards, praying for a win. The chandler is in his usual spot by the fire reading his broadsheet and the ship builders are just about to become drunk. Even when they do go overboard, which isn't often, they're never troublesome. Jem and Jeannie Jenkinson keep a respectable house. Brawling and excess isn't tolerated. There's always The Board Inn if that's the sort of night you're after.

The landlord of The Fleece has had the licence for as long as anyone can remember. There's been Jenkinsons at The Fleece for decades, if not longer. Jem's father, grandfather and great grandfather before him were all landlords here; Jem tells anybody who cares to listen this tidbit. He's proud of the fact and rightly so.

Jem Jenkinson is a big man, wiry. His face is almost covered by a bushy black beard and his hair is tied back in a queue. His eyes, keen as mustard, miss nothing. They constantly scour the inn looking for trouble makers, not that we get many you understand. I wouldn't work here if it was that type of inn. Last month we *nearly* had a fight when two fishermen from Sandsend fell out over a card game. Jem was on it quicker than a skinflint on a dropped coin.

His wife Jeannie, good to look at even now she's passed her prime, is buxom as you'd expect. Her faded blonde tresses are touched up at the roots but on special occasions she sports an elaborate wig. Tonight she's added blue ribbons to hold back her carefully arranged ringlets. It matches her frock. She always looks the part does Jeannie. She's an asset at The Fleece Jem says. Men come to look at her much as some come to see a sea view. These days she wears a trace of artifice but only enough to enhance what God gave her. She used to have an eighteen inch waist she told me - those days are long gone - but she still draws the eye.

Once a stranger made a lewd comment, offered to show her a good time, his feet never touched the floor on his way out. Jeannie's a 'look don't touch' type of landlady - not like Franny May at the White Horse and Griffin who on a quiet night will make up the takings in the time honoured way.

Tonight the bar at The Fleece is heaving, swelled by a crew of Dutch sailors. They hardly look old enough to hold their liquor but they're enjoying their shore leave and aren't over rowdy, just a little high spirited. Once they've enjoyed looking at Jeannie they settle themselves to drinking strong ale. The Dutch like strong ale.

Two whalers, noticeable by the smell of blubber, are sullenly staring at their drinks. Soon they'll be so far gone in their cups they'll fall asleep. The Freelove is in port and the rest of the crew

are no doubt breaking tables over each other's heads at The Board and possibly at The Dolphin if they've already been ejected, as is usual, from every other inn within walking distance. Locals know when a whaler docks to steer clear of certain taverns. The Fleece is a bit of a walk for most whalers' intent on drinking their own body weight in spirituous refreshments. On account of this tonight the bar at The Fleece is thrumming.

Clive, the pot boy, (he has his eye on me) hands over a tray and I make my way between the tables to unload the ale for Jerry Merchant, Jud Winterbottom and Joe Lester. The Three J's as they're known here at The Fleece.

'Thank you kindly Lucy,' Joe says passing me the empties. The three men are playing rummy and ignoring Meg Mount who hovers about the place hoping someone will buy her a drink. She's already struck gold with the Dutch sailors. I saw her tightening her bodice the minute she scented fresh blood; so long as she's not too obvious Jem will let her be.

When the door opens next a well dressed lady wearing a scarlet cloak stands just within. She keeps her hood up to obscure her face while her eyes adjust to the dim light and the tobacco perfumed bar. Another woman, a maid or companion, cowers behind her. Her grey cloak has mud splattered about the hem.

Jem at once is welcoming his genteel looking customer who is seeking shelter for the night. She cannot have come on the mail coach otherwise she would be staying at The Angel. She must have come on the Scarborough road, possibly by her own carriage.

I overhear Jem tell her he has a private room where she may dine if she will follow him. The back room is kept especially for such occasions - ladies travelling without a gentleman for protection tend to seek out the quieter inns and taverns. The lady will dine concealed behind a thick oak door, separate from the riff raff and then she'll retire above for the night. She'll be safe enough here. Jem and Jeannie will see to that.

I just hope she's not the type to want me waiting on her hand and foot all night. We're short staffed as it is. Sissy, the other tavern girl, has gone and got herself in the family way and so there's only me to do the fetching and carrying at the moment. Jeannie says she's looking for a girl to replace Sissy but it's been a week since she left and I've been run off my feet ever since. I've even been coming back in the mornings to help out with the overnight guests. Trudging up and down stairs with hot water for washing and shaving is harder work than waiting tables but there's no difference in the rate of pay I notice.

Jem will put the lady in room seven. It's the biggest and dearest room at the inn. It has a good view of the estuary but is quiet. It's on the third floor and I don't want to be running up and downstairs all night, my feet are killing me as it is.

'Bring in my valise,' the lady barks over her shoulder eyes darting about the bar. The young woman behind her flinches as if she's been slapped. 'And be quick about it. What number is my room?' This to Jem.

'Room seven ma'am. It's a comfortable room, our best. It has a good view over the estuary.'

'So I should hope. I am tired, bring me supper straight away then I will retire.'

She sweeps into the back room skirts cleaning The Pirates boots as she passes.

When did he come in? I didn't notice he was here. The Pirate, he's a smuggler not a real pirate, disappears for weeks on end only turning up like a bad penny when the gaugers have yet again failed to catch him.

'Well if it isn't my lucky night,' The Pirate smirks, 'Fetch me a brandy will you Lucy? Have you missed me? Like a nun would miss her virginity eh?'

I give him a look but turn away so he doesn't see me smile. He's a handsome one but I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him. And as I'm not much more than five foot two tall that's not far.

Clive pours the brandy and hands it to me. 'He's back then.' Clive is an expert at stating the obvious.

'So it seems. Wonder why he never gets caught? Every time he goes away I expect the next time I see him he'll be hanging on the end of a gibbert.' I admit to myself I'd be sorry to see the day, as I say he's a good looking man is The Pirate.

'Pays the excise men to look the other way I expect. Jem'd be gutted if he got caught; half the liquor in his cellar comes from The Pirate's runs.'

‘Never!’

I should have guessed of course. I’ve worked at The Fleece for nigh on two years. Now I come to think of it I suppose all the inns and taverns hereabouts must operate in the same way.

The Pirate stretches his legs in front of the fire and smiles up at me as I pass him his drink.

‘Keep the drinks coming Lucy, in fact bring me the bottle.’

‘You’ve had a good run then?’

‘Profitable and trouble free as always’. He turns and rummages in his saddle bag and brings out a piece of lace. ‘French lace, beautiful - quality - like you Lucy. Here trim some frock with it and then let me see you wearing it.’

I hesitate not knowing what he means by giving me a present. He’s never given me anything before, except lip.

‘Take it, your honour’s safe. If I mean to win you I’ll do it by fair means and not foul.’ He winks at me and I decide to take it.

Examining the delicate lace I’m more than grateful. It truly is fine, delicate work. I’ve never owned lace before and I know just the dress it will look well on. My green dress, my Sunday best. Not that I ever go to church. The only altar I pray at is the bar here at The Fleece. Who has time for church going? Even if I did have the time I wouldn’t bother. God hasn’t done me and Ma any favours.

Ma and me have three strapping lads to look after. My pa is fish food so we both have to work every hour to feed my brothers. Not that I begrudge it, my brothers are dear to me, they’re my life. They’re all under fifteen and Ma and me look forward to the day when they can start to bring in men’s wages. They help out as best they can but soon they’ll be able to make a bigger contribution to the coffers, God willing. Then Ma can begin to take a back seat - sometimes she looks fit to drop after a day gutting herring. She deserves a rest.

I put the lace in my pocket. ‘Thanks but if you think you’ll get anything in return then think again.’ I say standing up for myself. ‘You can sling your hook if that’s what you’re after.’ The Pirate laughs when I nod towards Meg Mount who is sat with the Dutch crew, her bosom spilling out of the top of her faded and patched dress. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to use it to pay for Mrs Mount’s attentions?’

‘I’d sooner take my liver out with a spoon. Credit me with more taste than that Lovely Lucy.’ He empties his glass. ‘I’ll have you know in Holland all the ladies are long legged, blonde and beautiful, I have no need of faded trollops like The Mount.

It’s my turn to laugh. I know all the customers refer to Meg in this insulting way but it still makes me smile. ‘Well in that case thank you very much.’ I go to collect the bottle of brandy he’s asked for. The least I can do is be swift with his order.

On my way back I notice The Mount is leading a boy no more than sixteen out of the door - a lamb to the slaughter. Poor lad will most likely get a dose of something he doesn’t want. He’ll be at the ship’s surgeon showing him his rash on his way back to Holland.

He won’t be the first and he won’t be the last.

I notice Billy the Boat Builder is staring at the bottom of his tankard looking like the world’s about to end. According to Clive the last time Billy came back from delivering a coble he caught his missus with his brother, a double blow for poor Billy that was. They’ve hopped it to Robin Hood’s Bay, Mary and her lover boy. Such a shame it should happen to him because The Boat Builder is a good man, honest and hard working. Mary should have known when she was well off but her sort never do Ma says. She took their daughter with her and poor Billy can’t seem to get over it. He knows it’s hopeless to try to get his little girl back; he can’t look after a toddler when he’s building boats all day long.

‘Here you are Billy; drown your sorrows in that.’ I take away his empty tankard and replace it with a fresh one.

He looks up, sad eyed and unshaven. ‘Thanks.’ It’s as much as anyone has got out of him since Mary left.

I ask The Pirate if he’s having supper.

‘It’s Thursday Lucy.’

I’d forgotten what day it was for the moment. All my days seem the same somehow. We both know he won’t sup at The Fleece on a Thursday and we both know why.

Fred the Fiddler is tuning up in the tap room and several customers decamp to hear him play making room for some who are propping up the bar. He knows all the good tunes does Fred. Some of the punters start to tap along, keeping their feet still is nigh on impossible when Fred gets going. I'd join in and dance a reel if my legs didn't ache so much. I should be out dancing myself not waiting tables in a lowly, harbourside tavern. I'm eighteen but I'll feel eighty by closing time.

Keeping time drumming his fingers on the beer soaked table is Carpenter Col. He's ship's carpenter at the Barkers yard. He's a steady chap. Reliable. The type any young girl such as me should aspire to marry. He'd put food on the table every day, a baby in your belly every year and be as predictable as the tide. I wipe the table top for him.

'Thank you kindly, Lucy love.' He's another who has his eye on me but even though I know Ma would tell me to grab him with both hands I can't think about him in 'that way'. His flat moon face and mop of straw coloured hair are pleasant enough but he doesn't set my heart racing. Ma says I'm a fool if I'm waiting for a knight in shining armour but a girl has to have her dreams. It costs nothing to dream in a world where everything else costs dear.

I notice The Pirate watching me. His earring catches the light as he turns away when he sees me looking in his direction. The earring gives him a rakish look. I like it.

One of the abandoned tables is quickly occupied when Tom and Tim Shanks, sailors on the collier The Wakeful sit down. They're twins but they don't look alike - well not more than ordinary brothers do. One's a bit fatter and one's a bit thinner but they're both as bald as coots. They like a glass or two of porter and they'll sit there now emptying and refilling their pots until closing time. Longer if there's a lock-in as there often is. I pray there won't be one tonight. My back's already breaking.

The young woman, the lady's maid, is making her way to the rooms above the bar, her head down praying none of the men will notice her. She's pretty and well dressed for a maid. She's carrying a tapestry bag which Jem takes from her. He begs her to go before him and then follows her to room seven to make sure his best customer has everything she needs. I can guarantee something will be lacking, the lady looks the sort that's never satisfied.

'Here take this wine to room three,' says Clive when I go back to the bar. I'd hoped for a break but as Ma says there's no peace for the wicked. At least room three's on the next floor so only one set of stairs to climb.

I knock and wait and when the door opens a portly man stands there in his stocking feet. 'Put it on the table,' he directs closing the door behind me.

I'm on my guard straight away.

I know what's coming next.

'How much for you to stay a while?' He looks me up and down like I'm a mare at a horse fair.

'It's not that sort of establishment sir, but if you want a woman the landlord will get you one.' I'm at the door before he can move. He's old and his body and wits are slower than mine. There's a strong smell of camphor in the room making me feel sick.

'Tell him then and be quick about it.'

I make my exit.

Back downstairs I find Jem in the taproom. I tell him room three's order.

'He can whistle.' The landlord scowls. 'What's he think this is, a knocking shop?'

I know for a fact if the man was a nob Jem would have sent the kitchen boy scurrying to Grape Lane to fetch Moll Myers or Tall Tina - Tall Tina is taller than most of the men she lays with but Jem says all women are the same size laying down. He's funny sometimes is Jem. As room three is the cheapest room at The Fleece the landlord probably thinks the old man will spend all his money on a tart and not on ale. Wine, women and song are only for them with fat purses.

'I've just been propositioned by a man old enough to be my grandfather. The man in room three,' I tell Clive as he fills my tray with ale for a table of carters who've just arrived.

'Bloody hell Lucy'. Clive's lips set in a line. 'Good job I knew where you were. If ever you're gone more than five minutes I'll be hammering on the door rest assured of that. You can't be too careful.'

He's told me this before and I'm grateful he looks out for me, really I am. It's a hazard all tavern girls have to put up with, men expecting more than ale and lodgings for the night but I'm not that sort of girl.

As I said, Clive's sweet on me. Pity he's not ten years younger and the landlord instead of the potboy. He'll never amount to much even though he's steady enough.

The maid reappears and makes her way back to the private room where she'll act as chaperone while her mistress eats her supper. Again she keeps her eyes down all the way. I'll give her a minute then see if there's anything her mistress needs.

Ed Fairchild stops me and orders supper and a small ale. He's supposed to be a Methodist but I never knew a Methody who drank before. They take the pledge and don't step over the threshold of a public bar ever again. Ed's pa would have the skin off his back if he knew where his only son was most nights of the week.

The lady and her maid make their way up the stairs. The lady looks thunderous. The mutton stew has a lot to answer for I think. Hot water will now be needed - another trip upstairs. It's a warm May night so at least a fire and a warming pan won't be asked for, thank goodness.

I spot Eva Drage a sail maker at Sanderson's yard. She's keeping company with the Dutch sailors hoping they'll buy her a drink or two. Eva has fallen on hard times recently, poor thing; she'll sit with anyone who's willing to buy her a glass of geneva. She's a pretty girl but her looks won't last long if she's not careful. Her sister has two kiddies to support after her husband went down with The Whitby Whaler. Eva's a good girl, she does all she can to help her sister put food on the table but I fear of late poor Eva's been selling her best asset to make ends meet.

She won't be the first and she won't be the last.

If Whitby has an abundance of inns and taverns it has even more 'shady ladies' as Ma calls them. Don't set foot down 'Grove' Lane or you'll get more than you bargained for. Besides the brothels there are girls on the street plying their trade day and night. They at least will be glad the Freeloze's in port, business will be brisk.

'Lucy love, have a break. Go and get your supper, I'll keep my eye while you have a bite to eat.' Jeannie's a good woman. She looks out for me.

'Is there anything other than mutton stew?' I ask knowing the answer. If it's Thursday it's mutton stew. The cook, Ma Roe, is nothing if not predictable - thinking about it that's not quite true - once she had a fever and 'lost' a day and baked a game pie on a Thursday. It put us all out for a month. It's never happened since.

Jeannie laughs. She knows I'd starve rather than eat Ma Roe's mutton stew. All it's fit for is greasing carriage axles.

'I'll nip to the pie shop,' I say untying my apron and hanging it behind the bar. I wish I was hanging it up for the night, I'm that tired. Out in the fresh air I wake up a bit. The nights stay light till almost ten in May. There's a fresh, tangy breeze coming off the sea. I hear the market clock strike the half hour after nine.

'Chicken or ham?' Pete the Pie Man asks grinning. He only has ham. It's his idea of a joke. Outside I cross Church Street and sit on the harbour wall to eat my pie, my aching legs swinging over the side. What a blessed relief to have the weight off my feet.

I'm hungrier than I realise and I'm just deciding whether to have another when I sense someone standing close behind me. I turn to see my youngest brother Si grinning down at me.

'What you doing out at this hour?' I ask him as if I didn't know.

'Hoping to bump into you.' He grins.

I feel in my pocket for the tips I've earned earlier and throw him a coin. 'Ask Pete for a dandelion and burdock as well if you want one, we can share it.'

When he's gone I sit listening to the sound of the swell hitting the harbour wall. The sun is going down and I wish I could go home. I've at least another three hours before I can even think about seeing my bed.

A group of whalers, arms around the women they're about to pay for, stagger past. I wrinkle my nose. The whalers stink worse than any fisherman. I'd have to be desperate to ... I shudder at the thought of laying with such men. The girls on Grove Lane can't afford scruples Ma says. That's why she works all hours to keep us from 'a fate worse than death'.

Si sits down beside me and stuffs the pie into his mouth as if he's not eaten for a week. Three brothers take some feeding I can tell you. They grow by the yard overnight Ma says, like hot house cucumbers. I've never seen a cucumber but Ma says she once saw one when she worked at the big house at Bagdale. 'When you've drunk your pop you'd best get home before it gets dark. You know Ma will worry if you're much later.'

'I know. I'll be off when you go back to work. I'll walk you to The Fleece,' he says trying to sound like a grown man. 'That way the whalers won't bother you and the press gangs - if there's any about - won't snatch me.'

Si at fifteen is already a head taller than me. He takes after Pa. All three of my brothers are tall and red haired whereas Ma and me are short and dark haired. Why hadn't I inherited red hair and long legs? Si's hair would look far better on me than it does on him I always tell him.

Arm in arm we set off. When he's promised me he'll go straight home I turn towards The Fleece then stop suddenly. I can hear the sound of someone crying. I turn to ask Si if he can hear it but he's already disappeared over the bridge. I peer around the ginnel that runs down the side of the inn. I can see the shape of a woman in the shadow, her back is leaning against the wall and her hands are covering her face. She's weeping, sobbing.

It's the lady's maid who arrived earlier with her mistress.

'Are you ill?' I ask taking a step closer. She almost jumps out of her skin. 'I'm sorry to startle you,' I say reaching out to touch her arm.

She pulls away then straightens up, smoothes her hands down her skirt and has passed me before I can say anything else.

'I felt a little unwell,' she mutters as she rushes past me into the inn.

I stand there for a moment scowling then follow her and watch as she pushes her way through the throng of customers and heads for the stairs. It's probably the mutton stew. It tends to lay heavy on the stomach. She's probably used to finer fare where she comes from.

I've just taken a bottle of wine to room four - a timid little man with steel rimmed pince nez and grey straggly hair - when I notice a young girl sitting beside Eva. She's striking rather than beautiful, freckles spill across her cheeks and such hair. I'd kill for hair like hers. The wig maker on Flowergate would pay a pretty penny for those locks I can tell you. Long and red like burnished gold, it cascades to her trim waist.

She's drawn the eye of the regulars and the Dutch crew that much is clear. She is more reserved than Eva, seems out of place here in a smoky, back street boozery. Is she new to Whitby I wonder as I side step one of the whalers who has a sudden urge to pinch my behind. She has fine features but her dimity dress isn't new. It's the type of thing a servant might wear. Even the Three J's have put down their cards to admire her.

The Pirate raises his hand to get my attention. He's noticed the red head; his eye wanders to her and then slowly back to me. He's comparing us and I'll come up wanting at the side of her. I sigh. I might only be a tavern wench but I want to look nice, be appreciated. I like to be admired, what girl doesn't? I always try my best with what God gave me; I've a tidy enough figure even though I was at the back of the queue when they gave out long legs. Ma says my eyes are my best feature, big and blue.

'Is your brother, the eldest one, looking for work my lover?' The Pirate asks giving me his full attention.

He always calls me *my lover* - he's not from these parts; I think I heard say he's from Cornwall. It makes me smile and I feel all warm inside when he says *my lover*. Yorkshire people call girls *love* all the time whether they know them or not, it's not a term of endearment. *My lover* is endearing- well to my mind anyway. The Pirate's Cornish accent and turn of phrase are different, nicer somehow than what I'm used to.

I'm taken aback by the question. Ma wouldn't like Si to be involved in the trade. It's unlawful. I think before I speak. 'He runs errands for the Barkers. He's fifteen and hoping they'll offer him an apprenticeship if he keeps his nose clean.'

'I know that my lover but I need a lad. Tell him to come and see me if he wants work. He'll make more money working for me than ever he'll get working at the Barkers yard. And he'll see the world into the bargain. If he's any sense he'll jump at the chance.'

'Jump at the chance of getting transported for smuggling, I think not!' I sound just like my ma.

'Do you see me on a transportation ship Lucy?'

'Well no but that doesn't mean to say it won't happen. Either that or there's hanging.'

'Lucy, you have an over active imagination. Whitby would grind to a halt without smuggled goods. Nobody wants to pay extortionate taxes and especially not tavern and inn owners. There's more than one blind eye turned in seafaring towns up and down the country.' He pours himself more brandy. More than half the bottle has gone but he doesn't seem any worse for wear. Men like The Pirate can hold their liquor.

'I'm offering your brother a job as a favour to you.'

He looks me in the eye. I'm not sure what to think. Another good turn? Why is The Pirate suddenly taking an interest in me and mine?

'Tell him or don't but if he's not been to see me by Monday then the offers withdrawn. I need a lad and I need him before my next trip. Think on it Lucy. Your ma could ease up after he's done a couple of good runs. She's got two other sons to mollycoddle if Si joins me. Surely that's enough for any mother?'

'I'll tell him,' I say cautiously, 'it's up to him what he does with his life. I'm not my brother's keeper.' I sound braver than I feel. I'll think it over before talking to Si, if I know him he'll jump at the opportunity to cut the apron strings. Like all fifteen year old boys he thinks he knows it all.

'Why are you being nice to me all of a sudden?' I ask laughing. I like he shows me attention but that's twice in the same night he's made a gesture.

He shrugs his broad shoulders then grins. 'Am I not always nice to you my lover? I thought I was but perhaps I'm not nice enough eh?'

'You're always nice to me but I just meant you're - forget I said anything.' He makes me flustered sometimes when he catches me off guard like this. I know he's only teasing but I can't always think of something clever to say, not until later of course.' He grins again and slips a coin in my pocket. A tip; he's always a good tipper I'll say that for him.

On my way back to the bar I realise something strange; I've never ever seen him with a woman. So often a pert Miss has strolled into The Fleece from Grope Lane trying to pick up a punter on a cold, wet night. Not once have I seen The Pirate take the bait not even when Pretty Peg has made a play for him. He's never ventured down that alley.

At the bar waiting for a tray of ale I sound Clive out. 'Is it true smuggling isn't as dangerous as it used to be?'

'Did Charles Penhaligon tell you that?'

'Who's Charles Penhaligon?'

He nods in direction of The Pirate. How odd. I've never thought of him having a real name before. Charles suits him and Penhaligon sounds aristocratic to my unschooled ears.

'He got run out of St Ives for privateering without the right paperwork. You need letters of marque in war time to take a ship. Penhaligon didn't bother with the legalities and so was forced to go on the run until things cooled down. That's when he washed up here. Why else do you think he's called The Pirate? He really was a pirate back in the day.'

'Never!' I say giggling. 'Cornwall's at the other end of the country isn't it?'

'Exactly. He's trouble that one. Bet you anything he'll swing one of these days, he'll deserve it.'

'Everyone who lives on the coast is involved in the smuggling trade to some extent, you know that.'

'True enough but there's degrees Lucy.' Clive looks a bit shifty then says, 'I've heard tell he left a wife in Cornwall, or she could be in Holland or France. He might have more than one for all I know.'

'He's married?'

'So I've been told.'

'Who told you?' I'm thinking of the lace he gave me earlier and the favour he's willing to put Si's way. He's always tipped well, always shown respect to me but what does it all mean? Twice in one night he's shown me consideration. I like him, he's exciting but I'm not stupid. He's a smuggler - a pirate - and despite everything that makes him dangerous to know. We have a history of banter, The

Pirate and me but he's never overstepped the mark, not like some I could mention. Lecherous Les for instance. Thank goodness he's not in tonight or else I'd be side stepping out of his reach every time I passed by him. I used to make Sissy serve him but now there's just me I can't avoid him.

I never dreamed The Pirate was a married man. That would explain why I've never seen him with a woman - possibly. Men don't always sup at the same inn ma says. Truth is men are a mystery to me most of the time. I've seen many a married man forget he's sworn vows to a wife when a fresh face sets her cap at him. Drink makes them forgetful.

'You don't want to believe a word Charles Penhaligon says.' Clive passes a full tray of ale over the bar. It weighs a ton; I'll have arms like a stevedore soon. I wonder if Clive's opinion has something to do with him having his sights set on me. I know if I give the pot boy the nod he'll make a move. Is he trying to put me off The Pirate?

I admit to myself Charles Penhaligon is more exciting than Clive, more exciting than most men around here come to that. He's a bit of a mystery, a bit dangerous but at the same time like I say he's never tried it on with me. I think about this as I deliver the ale to the carpenters. Should I be insulted? Perhaps I'm not his type. I remember his quip about long legged Dutch blondes - I'm dark haired and petite.

I deliver my tray then Jeannie says to take hot water to room seven. I must have been talking to The Pirate when the lady made her way up the stairs for I see the back room is empty. Another job for me; when I come down I'll have to clear her supper table. The jobs mount up and are never ending.

I climb wearily up the narrow, worn stairs then knock and wait an age for the door to open. When it does it's the lady herself and not her maid who opens it. I enter and put the jug by the bowl on a chest of drawers. A valise is open on the bed but is still packed.

The lady is wearing a gown totally unsuitable for travelling. It's the sort of dress I'd never be able to afford if I worked for five years. It's the loveliest shade of emerald green with two rows of bows down the low cut bodice. The skirt is full and she's wearing matching slippers with silver buckles. The lady is auburn haired, dark eyed and beautiful. She has a beauty spot above her top lip. I wonder if it's real or stuck on. I've heard ladies use tiny bits of mouse skin for beauty spots. I can't imagine wearing a bit of a dead animal on my face. I suppress a shudder.

'Is there anything else ma'am?'

'If you know the whereabouts of my silly maid that would be of help. I have been waiting this last half hour to get ready to retire but who knows where she is. Possibly up to no good downstairs if I know her. If you see her tell her to come to me immediately.'

Room seven has a small room next door where a lady's maid can sleep separately but be close by to minister to her mistress' needs. 'Is she not in the room next door?' I ask.

'Evidently not. If she were I would not be looking for her.'

She says this as if I'm the biggest fool she ever set eyes on. No wonder the poor girl has gone missing. I remember seeing the maid outside when I came back from my break but I've not seen her since. She's definitely not in the bar; she's hardly the type despite what her mistress thinks. 'I'll try to find her for you ma'am.' I drop a curtsy and step out of the room.

She doesn't even thank me for my trouble.

At the top of the stairs I decide to take a well earned breather and sit on the top step. I fold my arms over my knees, rest my head and close my eyes and once more wish I was at home in bed. That's when I hear it again.

Crying.

It's coming from the maid's room. She's back from wherever she's been then. Is she still unwell? Should I ask if she needs help? I drag my aching limbs upright and tap lightly on the door. She doesn't answer. I knock again. 'Are you alright Miss?'

The door opens a fraction but enough for me to see the maid's red puffy eyes looking back at me.

'Thank you but I am ...' She recognises me from the ginnel. 'As I said earlier I feel a little unwell.'

'Your mistress is on the warpath, she's looking for you.' I feel it's only fair to warn her. 'I can offer to help her if you can't manage yourself. It's no trouble.' It is but if the poor girl's sick it's the least I can do.

'I'll be alright in a moment. I can cope.' Tears spill down her cheeks unrestrained but before she can continue her mistress opens her door and stands on the landing. 'Johnson, come to me now. I am waiting. I have been waiting this last half hour.'

'The maid wipes her face on a handkerchief. 'Sorry my lady, I'm coming.'

She steps past me and they both go into room seven. I raise an eyebrow as I sit back down on the top step. I can hear the lady upbraiding her maid in no uncertain terms.

I once had aspirations to be a lady's maid. I can read and write a bit, sew as well as the next and make a go at dressing hair. After seeing how some ladies treat their servants I've changed my mind. At least working at The Fleece I get to go home at the end of the day. As a lady's maid you're never off duty, even when you're unwell.

After five minutes I go back downstairs. The fug from the bar is halfway up the stairs and it stings my eyes. George Hunt is knocking the tobacco from his pipe and refilling it with a pungent mixture that catches the back of my throat as I pass by.

'Bring us a mug of porter lass,' he says grabbing a handful of my skirt to stop me in my tracks.

'A simple hand in the air will get my attention Mr Hunt,' I say crossly as I unfurl his nicotine stained fingers. Will this night never end? Haven't they got homes to go to? It's still not that late I realise with a sigh. My feet tell me otherwise.

Meg Mount is back and making a nuisance of herself in the tap room. She's trying to get Carpenter Col to dance with her but he's having none of it.

A man sitting by the window raises his hand to attract my attention. A stranger, a handsome stranger. At least he's got manners - unlike George Hunt! I hadn't noticed the gentleman come in - I'd been distracted by the comings and goings of the maid. On my way over to him I notice the red head is still sat with Eva and the Dutch sailors. She's like a ray of sunshine on a dull day. She has a lovely smile. I wish I had leisure to enjoy myself. If I did have the time I wouldn't spend it here in a dingy old inn.

The handsome stranger is reading a newspaper by the window. He's alone. A stranger at The Fleece isn't unusual of course, in a busy harbour town like Whitby there are always strangers passing through. We get folks from all over the world but I've never seen him before.

I would have remembered him.

'What can I get you sir?'

'What's good to eat?'

He must have ordered his drink at the bar for he has a tankard of ale before him. I realise I'm staring. Close up I see he is the most handsome man I've ever laid eyes on. Even better looking than Charles Penhaligon. Dark curls touch his collar, high cheekbones, a straight nose and those eyes, eyes a girl could drown in. Are they blue or grey? Both I decide when he looks up at me and the light from the sconce turns them from grey to mesmerising blue.

'All we have is mutton stew sir,' I try and pull myself together, 'and if you have any regard for your stomach you'll do well to give it a wide berth.'

I don't know why I said that. I don't usually try to put the punters off the food but for some reason I feel the need to warn him.

He smiles as if he appreciates the heads up.

'I have a strong stomach and as I have an appetite bring it anyway.'

I nod and go to fetch his order. In the kitchen Ma Roe hands me the stew. It's swimming in grease. If the maid's eaten this no wonder she feels bilious. When I return with the handsome stranger's food he folds his newspaper and thanks me. 'It looks not unappetising,' he says cautiously inspecting the food.

'Don't be fooled by appearances,' I say smiling at him. I feel my cheeks flush. He's the type of man any girl could fall in love with, indeed I feel my heart warming as he looks at me.

'Can you ask the landlord if he has a room for the night? I have missed the tide and so although I hadn't intended to do so I need to spend the night in Whitby.'

A handsome stranger. It's what every girl dreams of, being swept away by a tall, dark, handsome stranger. Where would he take me, a turreted castle, a newly built mansion? A farmhouse on the moors?

'I know we have rooms spare sir, I'll tell the landlord you asked.' I chance my arm he wants to talk, wants company. 'I don't believe I've seen you in here before. Where are you from sir if you don't mind my asking?'

'Northumberland. I'm in Whitby on business. I've been to Whitby before but not for some years, it has changed so much since I was here last.'

'How so?'

He has such a lovely smile. Nice teeth, even and white.

'The town has grown beyond all recognition. There were never such fine houses on the west side, now I see crescents of large, grand houses have been built. And the harbour is heaving with ships of every variety. Whitby must be a prosperous place these days.'

'Besides herring fishing there's whaling now. That brings in all the money I believe.'

'With more men investing in whaling they can afford to build new houses I expect. It is very different to how I remember.'

'Some things stay the same,' I say looking at him from under my lashes. It's a trick Jeannie taught me to do. She says it makes a woman look alluring.

Would I break the habit of a lifetime for him if he asked? He might ask. Men away from home get up to all sorts. Sometimes they want company. Female company. I should know, I've been propositioned many a time. Some take a rebuke in their stride, like the old man in room three, but some turn nasty. Thankfully Jem or Clive are usually on hand to protect me.

He raises an eyebrow. 'What do you mean some things stay the same?'

'Whitby still has the prettiest girls on the north east coast,' I say flashing him my best smile.

He laughs. 'And are they all as modest as you ... ?'

'Lucy. My name is Lucy Lock sir. I can't speak for all the others but my ma says I shouldn't hide my light under a bushel.'

'Does she indeed.'

I can see Carpenter Col with his hand in the air trying to catch my eye but I ignore him and he gives up, gets to his feet and asks Clive for more ale. I know I shouldn't tarry long, there's always customers waiting to be served. With Sissy gone I'm run off my feet.

'Enjoy your supper sir,' I say moving off.

'I'll try,' he says raising an eyebrow and grinning.

Back at the bar I tell Jem a customer needs a room. 'Room twelve,' he says when I point out the gentleman in question. Jem can tell at fifty paces what a man will pay for night's accommodation. He judges him worthy of The Fleece's second best room only because the lady has already bagged the best.

I lean back against the bar and glance over to where the handsome stranger is eating his supper. Such a good looking man, I never saw the like before. I wonder what Northumberland is like? Much the same as Yorkshire I imagine. I picture the handsome stranger in a tall town house overlooking a different harbour. He looks well off, comfortable. Bet he's not married - he's youngish looking, no older than two and twenty but who can tell? Not me.

I give myself a talking to.

He's a gentleman - Jem is right about that. You can tell by just looking at him; his clothes, the confident way he carries himself. And here's the rub: no gentleman would look at a tavern girl. Well he would if he thought the tavern girl could be bought - but I'm not the type. I'm no Meg Mount. Pity because he's so good looking. It's as if he's been blown in on an easterly wind all fresh faced and lively. He makes me want to change my ways... but I know I won't. Not even for one as good looking as him.

Men away from home often act upon a whim Jeannie always says. They like a change. She's spent her life fending off amorous gentlemen so she should know. She has it down to a fine art. Somehow she lets them know she's not going to be another notch on their bed post but does it in such a way their pride isn't injured too severely. She's a business woman and doesn't want to upset her customers.

She says when men are away from home and married they feel like they've been let off the leash and so take advantage of the fact they won't be found out if they stray. Young, single men away from home - I judge the handsome stranger to be one such - like to take the opportunity of widening their experience. Try out a different type to what they're used to, or something different altogether.

I'm not too sure what Jeannie means really, I've never had a suitor. (I've only ever been kissed once and that wasn't by mutual consent so I don't think that counts). Once a man, a stranger, not so good looking as this gentleman but handsome enough, took my refusal to heart and said I was leading him on. He called me such a lewd word, wouldn't take no for an answer. Eventually he pulled me onto his knee and tried to kiss me. Then when I struggled free he grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me to the foot of the stairs. He never saw the inside of room twelve because Jem and Clive flung him out of the door so fast he landed in the middle of the road, slap bang in a pile of horse dung. Clive chucked his bags after him for good measure.

Jeannie says when a man is in his cups he can get amorous but mostly they are harmless by then. It's the ones not quite rolling drunk who you have to watch out for she says. Pawing and getting my bottom pinched is all in a night's work for a tavern girl, doesn't mean I have to like it though does it? I imagine it's far worse at The Dolphin and I wouldn't wait tables at The Board for a King's ransom.

The handsome stranger must be hungry for he has almost finished his supper. He may live to regret it if he's lucky. I check my hair with my fingers. By this time of night my curls are beginning to droop. I saunter over to clear his table hoping he notices the easy sway of my hips but to my dismay he's looking the other way. Is he looking at the red head? She's no better than she should be. She's definitely looking in my handsome stranger's direction the minx. I stand before him so now all she can see is my back. That'll show her coming in here with her swanky ways.

'Can I get you anything else sir?'

Jeannie says it's a fine line between sounding provocative and sounding like a tart. I'm not sure I can carry it off but he doesn't seem to notice either way.

'You were right Lucy, the food was not so good.' He has remembered my name ... 'Bring me more ale to get rid of the taste will you?' He puts his hand to a stomach that has no hint of flab. 'Man alive, it was possibly the worst meal I've ever eaten, I should have listened to you but I was famished.'

'It's funny,' I say smiling, 'everything else the cook makes is good. Her game pie is especially delicious. It's just the mutton stew on a Thursday that's off. Take my advice, when you're next in town call any day but a Thursday.' I'm about to wink then think better of it - it's possibly too forward, too familiar. 'The landlady has tried everything to dissuade the cook from making it, says the takings are always down on a Thursday, but Ma Roe insists on keeping the tradition. No one knows why.'

'I have a housekeeper and she has similar determined views; fish on Friday, cheese pie and stewed fruit on Mondays. Cooks are peculiar characters I think and a rule unto themselves. I shall remember your advice Lucy.'

'The thought of seeing him again makes my heart skip a beat. I hurry away so I might return all the quicker with his order. Again those eyes draw me in, those twinkling eyes full of mischief and something else, something indefinable.'

Clive has noticed me talking to the handsome stranger. He misses nothing where I'm concerned. 'Watch out Lucy love. Remember what happened last time a nob took a fancy to you?'

I ignore the barb and with tankard in hand I turn to take the handsome stranger his drink. I've not gone more than four steps when the red head is in front of me blocking my way. Before I can say a word she's taken the ale from my hand and replaced it with a coin.

'You look run off your feet, here let me lend a hand.'

I watch open mouthed as she glides between the tables, towards *my* handsome stranger's table. 'Well I never!' I say putting my hands on my hips.

At first he doesn't look up. Then she speaks to him and before you know it she's sat opposite him. I'm that mad. Who does she think she is? He's *my* handsome stranger.

I hear Clive laugh. He's enjoying himself. He doesn't like it when men flirt with me, not that the handsome stranger was flirting, he was just being friendly more's the pity. 'Oh dear Lucy love, looks like you've got competition.'

I turn on my heel and head to the private room to clear the table and sideboard. In the kitchen I put the dishes in the deep enamel sink with a clatter. Ma Roe has made a dish of tea and is sat enjoying her brew.

‘Kitchen’s closed if anyone asks.’ I glance at the clock and see it wants fifteen minutes past eleven. ‘There’s hot milk and nutmeg there. It’s for room seven.’

I’d just sat down, now I’m on my feet again sighing. ‘More stairs to climb! It feels like I climb my way all the way to the abbey some nights. One hundred and ninety nine steps are nothing to working here.’

‘Get away with you. Wait until you’re my age, you’re just a slip of a thing.’ I watch her add a tot of rum to her tea. ‘Nearly closing time lass, in an hour you’ll be tucked up in bed.’ I pick up the milk and find a small pewter tray kept especially for the purpose of carrying one glass, (Jeannie thinks it looks genteel).

Back in the bar I notice the red head has my handsome stranger’s hand in hers. The cheek of the woman! She’s telling his fortune. That explains why I’ve not seen *her* before, she’s a gypsy. The Spring Fair always comes to Whitby in May. It’s the one time of year when the locals lock their doors. Most of the travellers are light fingered; they’ll pinch anything that’s not nailed down. The red head will be with them I shouldn’t wonder.

Some of the travellers are dark and swarthy, good looking men but as untrustworthy as the whaler’s my ma says. We get one or two in the tap room sometimes but Jem doesn’t encourage them, says the polish’ll be nicked off the tables if they can’t find anything else worth pinching. I’m surprised Eva has anything to do with the red head but perhaps she doesn’t know she’s a gypsy.

The handsome stranger is smiling and throwing his head back and laughing at something she’s saying to him. Hussey. It’ll all be lies. His nice teeth flash. I’d bet next quarter’s wages she’s telling him he’ll fall in love with a red haired beauty. Jeannie says some men are taken in easily enough, especially when they’ve taken a fancy to someone, they’ll believe anything a woman tells them. Some women aren’t backwards at coming forward Ma says. I wonder if I should encourage Charles Penhaligon? Should I try flirting with him a bit more? I’ll give it some thought. I know he likes me but how much and to what end I’m uncertain, I’m hardly a woman of the world.

Outside room seven I get my breath back then knock. The maid, looking downcast, opens the door and bids me to enter. ‘Put it by my lady’s bed, if you will please.’

I do as I’m asked. ‘Will that be all?’

‘You may go.’ The lady is sitting up in bed looking like a doll in a shop window.

I smile tentatively at the maid as I make to leave. She still looks unwell; her eyes are red rimmed and glassy. ‘If you need anything, let me know,’ I whisper as I pass by. She half smiles and thanks me then closes the door behind me. On the landing I hear her mistress bark an order to open a window then she adds in an irritable tone ‘not so wide fool’.

I’m so glad I don’t have to put up with the likes of her. I feel sorry for the poor maid.

I wait on the landing hoping the maid comes out so I can check she’s alright. She looks quite drawn still. I don’t have long to wait. When she comes out of room seven her hand flies to her heart but then sees it is only me; she’s a bag of nerves and no mistake.

‘Are you sure you don’t need anything. I can fetch you something to settle your insides if you’ve a mind. The mutton stew sits heavy on any stomach but if you’ve a delicate one then it’s far worse I should imagine.’

The maid is trying her best not to cry. ‘I did not eat supper. It is not mutton stew that ails me.’ Her hand flies to her mouth as if she has said too much.

‘Your mistress has a bit of a sharp tongue does she not?’ I say hoping to befriend the young girl. She’s not much older than me and looks in need of a friend.

‘She can be quite exacting when we travel. She is nervous travelling alone and it makes her more short tempered than usual.’ She smiles and at once I see how pretty the maid is. ‘Not that she is ever amiable. It is not in her nature to be pleasant.’ She moves closer to me as she whispers, ‘If there is a fault to be found she will find it and then she will hold me personally responsible for it. I should not complain but tonight I feel... tired and worn down.’

‘Where are you heading?’

‘Tomorrow we travel on to Guisborough, where her brother resides.’ She lets out a sob.

‘The brother is of the same nature as your mistress?’

The maid thinks before she speaks and looks at the floor before saying in hushed tones. ‘He is demanding in other ways. He has been staying in Scarborough with her for the past four months. I... I do not relish being in his company again, but what am I do?’

I've heard of men taking advantage of servants. Is that what she's hinting at? Poor girl.

I realise Jeannie will wonder where I've got to. 'I'll be finishing here in half an hour. I'll bring you a drop of brandy up before I head home if you want.'

'You're so kind. I do not even know your name. I'm Susan, Susan Johnson. That would be most kind. I do not like to go downstairs alone, it would not be seemly.'

I tell her my name and smile self-consciously. She must think me a wanton working in a bar. I'd never planned to work in such a place; it wasn't like I had much choice. I'd hoped to go into service at the very least but then Pa was lost at sea and this was all I could get at short notice. We needed the money. Still, it's steady work and even though the pays not up to much the tips all add up. Perhaps soon I'll start looking for something else, something more respectable.

Clive has a face on him like a thunder cloud. 'Where've you been? I was about to come looking for you.' I'm about to snap at him but then I see how one of these nights I might be glad he's looking out for me.

'The lady's maid is unwell. I was talking to her. Give me a brandy Clive; she needs it to settle her stomach.'

Reluctantly, as if he's paying for it out of his own pocket, he gives it to me. There are empty tables now, discarded tankards to collect. Some of the customers are heading for the door. I notice my handsome stranger is on his own again, the red head is talking to Eva. One of the Dutch sailors is trying to get her attention but she bats him away like a troublesome fly.

My legs ache as I climb the stairs brandy in hand. In answer to my knock Susan opens the door just wide enough to check it's only me. She steps aside and lets me in.

'You are so kind, thank you. Allow me to pay you.'

'It doesn't matter; it can go on your lady's bill. Her type never notice what they've been charged for. Drink it down then get some sleep, I'm sure you'll feel better in the morning.'

We wish each other a good night.

I head downstairs and am dismayed to realise someone is coming up. There's hardly room to pass on the narrow stairs. I pray it's not the groper heading for room two. I'll never get past unmolested and Jem and Clive can't see what goes on here on the stairs.

At first I don't make out who it is then I see it's my handsome stranger.

Behind him is the red head.

She's going to his room!

I have to push myself against the wall to let them pass. 'Goodnight Lucy.' As bold as brass he is!

'Night sir.' I just have time to notice the red head doesn't look so sure of herself now. Nevertheless I still feel the need to warn him she's a gypsy; I bet he'll have been robbed by the morning.

He won't be the first and he won't be the last.

It's a shame because he's nice. Before I can think what to say they're gone.

Gone to his room.

I reach the bar just as Jem rings last orders. Then the inn door opens. Who on earth is coming in at this hour? I sigh and rub the base of my back with both hands. Then I see it's my Uncle Bob and cousin John. They'll be on their way to Robin Hood's Bay with a cart load of grain. As soon as a ship is unloaded they set off no matter what time of day or night. Time is money these days. They'll be wanting a brandy each to set them up for the journey.

'How's your ma?' my uncle asks as he pays me for the drinks.

'Same as always, worn out.'

'At least the boys will soon be earning men's wages. George told me last week he wants to join the navy. Fourteen is a good age to start being a sailor.'

'Over Ma's dead body. If he's going to sea then he'll get a place on a coble if Ma has anything to do with it.'

'Ah well, boys have minds of their own.'

I look at my cousin who's never had an original thought in his life. He followed his pa into the transport trade because my uncle told him to.

'Here give your ma this. Tell her I'm only sorry it can't be more.' He hands me a few coins which I add to the tips in my pocket. It all goes in the caddy at the end of the night. I thank him with a kiss on his rough cheek.

'Can I get one er them?' Carpenter Col slurs as he heads for the door. He's made brave by the skin full of ale he's supped. My Uncle Bob tells him where to go in a no uncertain terms.

'You watch out on your way home Lucy love. The crew of The Freelove are well oiled and looking for trouble - or a tart. They won't stop to notice you're a good lass. Cross over the road when you pass The Dolphin.'

'I will. I know how to take care of myself don't you worry.' Since Pa died Uncle Bob looks out for us even though he has his own brood to look after. He helps out when he can. He knows how we're situated.

At last I hang up my apron. I'm just about to say goodnight when I see the red head who had gone to *my* handsome gentleman's room heading for the door at speed. I hadn't noticed Eva waiting at the bottom of the stairs. I hope they're not cooking up some trickery to steal from people. Has the red head robbed the handsome stranger and is she now heading off with his purse? Are they going to split the spoils?

Eva grabs the red head by the arm and I follow them but then they dash down the ginnel so I can't follow without being seen. Standing on the corner I hear Eva say, 'That were quick. Were he bad ... did 'e not want to pay? Did 'e hurt yer?' Then I hear the red head laugh and say something about losing her nerve. They turn in my direction but I dodge back into the doorway so they don't see me. I watch them walk off arm in arm.

I'll have a word with Eva when I see her next. She doesn't want to get mixed up with the gypsies; it'll only end up with her on the wrong side of the law and her picking up the pieces after they've scarpered.

I turn for home. As I approach The Dolphin I cross the road as instructed by Uncle Bob. I can see Eva has crossed the bridge to the west side with her new friend.

I think about the lady's maid. I wonder if she's in trouble. I'll see if I can't talk to her in the morning. There's usually a man behind most trouble Ma says. I remember back to earlier, to the maid being sick in the ginnel. What if Ma Roe's cooking isn't to blame? What if she's in the family way? Surely not. The girl is respectable, a maid, a pretty maid. What if someone has taken advantage of her? Her mistress' brother sounds dodgy? I realise my imagination is filling in the blanks.

I sigh remembering that in seven hours I'll be back at The Fleece. If only Jeannie could find someone to replace Sissy.

As I cross the bridge I see The Pirate leaning on a capstan. Is he waiting for me?

'I was hoping to see you. The whalers are nowhere about but I wanted to be sure you got home safely,' he says taking my arm.

I wonder why. He's never been so attentive before. He turns and leads me towards Bagdale. 'I wanted a chance to speak to you away from The Fleece,' he says as we pass the street where I live. 'I think you know I have feelings for you Lucy.'

I'm more than a little surprised. Every time he comes in The Fleece he talks to me, flirts a little but he's never given me reason to think it was anything other than banter. What can he mean by 'feelings'? I hope it doesn't mean what I think it means. I hope he's not trying to lead me astray.

He stops and looks up at a house that overlooks the harbour. It's a tall house, grand, impressive. It has lots of windows. I'm glad I don't have to clean them.

'This is where I live.'

I'm taken aback.

'I never imagined you living in a house,' I say then realise I must sound dim-witted. 'I thought you would sleep aboard your ship is what I meant to say.' We'd passed The Pioneer earlier; his ship is moored by the bridge.

'I have enough of sleeping on board when I'm at sea. I need somewhere comfortable when I'm ashore. I'm showing you this because it could be your home too Lucy.'

I'm really confused now. 'Are you wanting a housekeeper?'

Charles Penhaligon laughs. He's even more handsome when he laughs. The skin by his twinkly eyes wrinkles and I decide he certainly is a good looking man. More so than I've given him credit for.

'I'd want you to keep house for me but I'm asking you to be my wife. I fear I'm making a bit of a mess of this proposal however.' Before I can say anything else he carries on. 'I've had a taking for you for a while now Lucy, I thought you knew how I felt.'

'I never guessed. You never said anything to make me think you liked me, well not enough to offer to wed me anyway.' I feel quite dizzy.

Is this a joke or is it a ruse to have his way with me? Is he promising to marry me thinking he can try the goods first?

Ma and Jeannie say men will say anything to get what they want. They also say it's a different matter when they've got what they were after. Again I think of the poor maid.

'I've been careful,' he says, 'I didn't want to scare you off but I see I've been too cautious if you say you had no inkling whatsoever. I've seen how all the men look at you and I've seen how some treat you. I didn't want you to get the wrong impression by pushing too hard. I see how you are younger than me but not by more than ten years or so.'

'But you're already married,' I suddenly blurt out remembering what Clive told me earlier.

Again he laughs. 'I expect the pot boy told you that, I've seen how *he* looks at you. I should have guessed he would try to blacken my name.' He shrugs as if it doesn't matter to him. 'I'm not married. I was but she died four years ago.' The sadness in his eyes is fleeting. 'My offer of marriage to you is serious Lucy; I think we could make a good life together. I'm not the type of man who wears his heart on his sleeve but I do respect and love you. I don't expect you to give me an answer tonight - I had hoped you were expecting me to offer for you but it seems I miscalculated.' He moves closer and takes my hand in his. 'I sail again on Monday. Perhaps you'll think about my proposal whilst I'm gone. I'll be back by the middle of June God willing.'

It's not often I'm speechless but for a long minute I can't think what to say.

'Talk it over with your ma if you need to. I can offer you a comfortable life and I'll do all I can for your ma and your brothers. I already offered Si a job. I mean it Lucy, I want you to marry me, live here and have a family of our own.'

I can't imagine what my ma will say. Will she give her blessing to me marrying a man who sails close to the wind, who's a smuggler? He must have read my mind because then he says, 'Not all my work is illegal, I do other shipping that's above board. I have other interests, lucrative interests so if ever I got caught you wouldn't be destitute. I even have money in the bank. If we wed you would have an allowance, money for yourself and you wouldn't have to wait tables at The Fleece. You'd be my wife and look after this.' He glances at the four story town house behind us. I can't take it all in.

I've always liked him, fancied him you might say but I never thought he'd look at me in that way. Me marry The Pirate! It sounds too good to be true. I've often wondered how old he is. I think he's right, he's probably ten years my senior so not too old.

'This is so unexpected. Only earlier tonight did I find out your name.'

He smiles down at me making my tummy turn a somersault. 'Did you think you would be called Mrs Pirate?'

'I didn't think to marry you at all.'

'And now? Will you at least give it some thought?' The look in his eyes makes my knees go weak.

'I will, yes.'

'Good. Jeannie says you are a good girl and I've seen with my own eyes how you conduct yourself. You haven't always had it easy I know but if you marry me all your worries will be over, money worries at any rate.' Suddenly he looks a little unsure. 'Am I wasting my time? Do you at least like me?'

'Not at all,' I stumble and realise when I see his face he has misunderstood. 'I mean I do like you, what little I know about you that is. I only meant you wouldn't be wasting your time, it's just all so sudden.'

He looks serious suddenly. 'The Penhaligons hail from Cornwall. We were once landowners, owned copper mines - we still have some land around Perranporth but I've made my life in the north now. Whitby is my adopted home and it is here where I wish to stay and bring up a family. With you Lucy if you will have me but as I say you do not have to give me an answer tonight.'

My head is spinning. I can't believe this is happening to me.

'You must be tired my lover, now let me see you safely home.'

We turn back the way we came and he leads me to my cottage. I feel like I'm sleep walking and I'll wake up soon. By the door he leans in and kisses me. My knees really are weak now. It's my first proper kiss and I'm not sure if I'm supposed to kiss him back but when he pulls away he's smiling so I must have done it right. 'Goodnight Lucy, sleep tight.' He squeezes my hand and without another word he's gone.



Before I know it I'm re- crossing the bridge on my way back to The Fleece. It's a bright spring morning but I'll see none of it. I'll be traipsing up and down the stairs with water for the guests to wash and pots of coffee to clear their thick heads. But I don't care. I'm so full of thinking about last night and my *proposal*. The Pirate, Charles Penhaligon has asked me to marry him. Who would've thought it?

I've not mentioned it to Ma yet. I need to think about it myself before I hear what she's got to say. All I know is that it would be good for her and my brothers if I married but I can't marry just to please them can I? I think of his lips on mine and my heart starts fluttering like a caged a bird.

When I get to The Fleece Jeannie isn't about but Jem is behind the bar rubbing his bearded chin and looking bleary eyed. Mornings at The Fleece are sombre affairs; the smell of stale ale and pipe smoke hangs heavy in the air. We're usually too tired to chat but this morning I feel as light and cheerful.

'Morning Jem.' I want to ask him about Charles Penhaligon, pick his brains to try to find out what he knows about him but I can see by his face it's too early in the day for idle chatter. Best wait until tonight.

I make sure my first trip is to my handsome stranger's room. He opens his door with a face half covered in shaving lather. He's managed with cold water it appears. 'I'll bring you coffee shall I,' I say, 'or shall you come down to break your fast?' Even with a face full of lather he's still handsome.

'I'll come down - save your legs,' he says smiling. He's such a nice gentleman. I wonder if the red head came back. I hope not.

Next I take hot water to Susan's room but when I knock there's no answer. I knock on her mistress' door instead. She bids me enter. The lady is out of bed but not dressed.

'I have no idea where my maid is,' she says all in a huff. She's another all in a lather but of a different sort. 'Get her for me.'

No 'Good Morning' no 'please or if you wouldn't mind'.

'I'm afraid she isn't in her room ma'am.'

'Go and look again.'

I do as she bids but this time I try the door. It's unlocked. I step in and see the room is empty. The bed hasn't been slept in I guess and the maid's belongings have gone. Has she done a moonlight flit?

Her mistress is going to take it out on me I just know it.

'What do you mean she has gone? Gone where?' The lady is furious when I tell her the news. 'How am I to dress and get to my destination unaccompanied? I cannot travel unchaperoned, I'm a respectable lady. How dare she leave me like this?'

I feel like saying I neither know nor care but instead say, 'I can help you dress, ma'am but after that I'm afraid I cannot be of use to you.'

The next half hour tries my patience to say the least. I had hoped to wait on my handsome stranger but the lady is more demanding than even I gave her credit for. If I miss seeing him again I'll be that mad. Then I feel disloyal - should I be having such thoughts now I might be going to be a married woman? It all feels very odd. I don't know how I'll act tonight when The Pirate - when Charles - comes into the bar. I imagine myself trying to act normally but know it will seem peculiar. I bet I'll go red.

Eventually the lady is dressed and ready to break her fast. I head downstairs and start my chores. Jeannie is about now and has helped out in the breakfast room so I'm not that far behind.

'It's the last time you'll have to help in the mornings Lucy,' she says passing me a loaded tray to take to the kitchen. 'We've got a new girl starting tomorrow.'

'That's good news. Who is she, do I know her?'

She winks at me and says, 'Least said soonest mended.' I think this an odd reply but as the lady from room seven is making her way to her carriage and Jeannie goes to bid her farewell I can't ask her what she means.

I make my way upstairs to clean room seven ready for the next guest. The lady's gone and she hasn't even left a tip, not a penny! I wish I'd let her manage on her own now.

When I come down Jeannie is in the kitchen nursing a dish of tea.

'Can I ask you something?' I sit opposite her. She looks surprisingly clear eyed for so early in the morning. Jeannie is a 'woman of the world' Ma says. I sometimes ask her about things I can't bring myself to ask my ma, things about men usually.

'Ask away Lucy love.' She winks at me. 'Has he finally got round to asking you?' My face must be a picture because Jeannie tosses her head back and laughs. 'Did you really not suspect The Pirate has a taking for you?'

I can't speak. How does she know? I'm stunned into silence but I shouldn't be surprised really, Jeannie knows everything that happens in Whitby. She could get a job at the newspaper offices. Finally I splutter, 'How do you know?' This only makes her laugh louder.

'It's as obvious as the pretty nose on your face. The way he follows you about with his eyes, never takes them off you. Oh Lucy love are you blind?'

I pull myself together and remember my question. 'Clive says The Pirate's - says Mr Penhaligon's married but he told me last night that his wife died four years ago.'

Jeannie sips her tea. She can be quite lady like when she wants to be. 'That's what he told me. Said he'd married a Cornish girl, she was the daughter of a merchant or some such. Her family had land and when her father passed he left her comfortably off. Then she died young, poor thing. He didn't say how she died and I didn't like to ask. He also said the Penhaligons have money but he'd had a falling out with his Uncle who was his nearest relative. I got the impression his wife's death hit him hard and made him reckless. That's when he got into trouble with the law I expect.'

I think about all she's telling me. Jeannie knew more about The Pirate than I do!

'I get the feeling he's only involved with the trade for the excitement', she says carrying on where she left off, 'some men are like that. It's a distraction, stops them thinking too much. Perhaps he felt he'd nothing to lose after he'd lost his wife but all that could change now Lucy. If he has you I'd wager he's settle down a bit.' She shrugs and smiles. 'Perhaps he wouldn't feel the need to take risks if he had you waiting at home keeping his bed warm.'

I feel my face flush. 'It's all a bit of a surprise. I'm such a dolt I had no idea he had his eye on me, well not in that way.' I look Jeannie in the eye. 'What would you do in my shoes?'

'Ah but I'm not in your shoes my girl. To my mind you could do a lot worse. If only I was five years younger and didn't have my Jem ... Charles Penhaligon is a handsome one and no mistake. And well enough off so you wouldn't have to worry about money. Talk to your ma Lucy love, she's best placed to advise you but I think you two would make a handsome couple. You could make a go of it I'm sure. You don't know how pretty you are that's your trouble but you're a sensible lass who never has her head turned with flowery words. If he's looking to wed, to settle down again then I can't think of a better bride than you although we'd be sad to see you go. You're a good worker and never any bother, unlike Sissy.'

Me a bride! Yesterday I had no idea in my head about marrying anybody and now here I am thinking of marrying Charles Penhaligon, ex pirate, smuggler, widower ... I do like him, he makes me feel all warm inside and he makes me laugh but do I love him? I've often heard Jeannie say, in jest, that it's possible to love a rich man just as well as a poor one. Not that Charles is rich exactly but that house. I try to imagine myself as mistress of the fine town house overlooking the harbour which he showed me last night. I picture myself in a fine dimity dress edged with French lace and a basket over my arm doing my marketing. I picture myself not working at The Fleece, not aching in every bone in my body by closing time.

'I'll talk to Ma,' I say getting up to go back upstairs. I've still room twelve to fettle.

At last I'm finished - room twelve has left a decent tip I'm pleased to say - I knew he would. Handsome is as handsome does.

I make my way out into the street. It's busy with carriages, horses, carts and people going about their day. I see Eva in the distance but she disappears down Sanderson's yard before I can catch her up. I'm about to head for the bridge when someone falls into step with me. A shadow looms over

me but as I look up I see it's my handsome stranger. 'You're finished for the morning?' he asks smiling down at me.

'I am but I'll be back again tonight.'

'I'm on this tide so hopefully I will be supping at home this evening. No mutton stew for me.'

'There's no mutton stew for anyone,' I smile, 'it's always fish on Fridays.'

We cross the bridge and I see a ship moored next to The Pioneer.

'This is my ship,' my handsome stranger points towards a collier.

'What line are you in?' I ask knowing he's not going to say smuggling wine, tea and silk. He has honest eyes.

'I transport anything and everything. From grain to timber, even the odd person sometimes. Today we are taking pig iron to Newcastle. We brought down a shipment of coal three days ago.' He laughs suddenly. 'Did you think me a smuggler?'

'No, but if you were I wouldn't think any less of you.' I blush at my forward remark. I bet he thinks me brazen.

'There is a lot of it about these days with taxes so high. There is money to be made for those who are brave enough to take the risks.'

'You think the risks are high sir?'

'My name is Reynolds, Gabriel Reynolds. It seems a little late for introductions but as I know your name it seems remiss of me not to supply my own.' He pushes his tricorne on his head as a gust of wind nearly takes it. 'The risks for smuggling are high I should think. If caught a smuggler could hang but then again everyone knows someone who at least receives smuggled goods and I cannot remember the last time a smuggler was tried and paid the ultimate penalty here on the coast so perhaps I'm wrong. It's expected hereabouts. You're not a smuggler yourself are you Lucy?'

Mr Reynolds smiles at his little joke. 'Not me but I know someone, someone I would be sorry to lose who dabbles in the trade.'

'Ah, then he must forever be looking over his shoulder. He must think it worth the danger or else he wouldn't do it. There are rich pickings for those who dare. It is a relative perhaps, a brother?'

'I have three brothers but they're too young. It's a... friend.'

'I see. It is something I cannot advise you about I'm afraid but if you care for this man and it would hurt you if he got caught then you should think carefully if you are going to tie yourself to him.'

I feel my face flush for the second time this morning.

'He has his finger in other pies - legal pies that is.'

'Then perhaps you might convince him to concentrate on those if smuggling makes you worry about him. If he cares for you he might listen.' He shrugs as we both look at The Pioneer. Does he know her hold will be full of goods on which tax hasn't been paid next time she sails? Of course he doesn't, he's not local to Whitby, how would he know?

'And do you have someone you care about waiting for you to come home Mr Reynolds?' I change the subject quickly. I notice his face cloud over.

'I do. A childhood sweetheart.'

'Well, you don't look too happy about it,' I say laughing despite his solemn expression. 'Has someone put a gun to your head?'

'Not at all,' he says looking uncomfortable. 'The lady hopes we will marry at Christmas...'

'But what about you? Have you doubts; have you changed your mind?'

I don't know why I said that. I just got the feeling that's what's on his mind.

'You are very perceptive Lucy. For some little time now... but I should not be disloyal. Forgive me, I speak out of turn. Safe to say you and I both have some hard thinking to do about our futures but I must make tracks.' He turns to walk away. 'Who knows Lucy perhaps we may meet again next time I'm in Whitby. I hope you make the right decision regarding your *friend*.'

'Have a safe journey Mr Reynolds. I hope you too make up your mind in a way that makes you happy. I never really gave marriage much thought until now but it's a big decision is it not? I'll talk to my ma about it. She's sure to have an opinion.'

'That's a good idea,' he says as he waves and walks towards his ship. 'Goodbye Lucy it was a pleasure to meet you.'

I call after him. 'Is that you?' I point to the name emblazoned on the side of the collier, the Alnmouth Boy.

He bows theatrically and looks up at his ship. 'It is and despite being Alnmouth born and bred, I have taken quite a liking to Whitby; the place has more than one attraction.'

The End