

Prologue

Newcastle upon Tyne, 1932

Jack smoothed back his dark brown hair and applied a touch of Brylcreem. His sister Ena wouldn't approve, but what the heck, all the lads were using it nowadays. He took his new blue blazer from the wardrobe and tried it on in front of the mirror. Mam was right, it went well with his stone grey trousers and crisp white shirt. He smiled at himself in approval, stepped back from the mirror and straightened his tie. Yes, he thought, that'll do nicely.

He splashed on the fancy aftershave his mother had given him for Christmas and patted his face. Just wait till the girls smell this, he told himself, they'll be queuing up to dance with me!

He whistled as he took the stairs two at a time, stopping in the hall for a moment to wink at himself in the mirror. Music was coming from the sitting room and he quietly tiptoed inside. His mother was sitting in her favourite chair engrossed in her needlework while tapping her feet to Bing Crosby singing 'Star Dust' on the radio. Jack cleared his throat, stepped forward and bowed low. 'May I have the pleasure of this dance, Mother?'



She put down her embroidery and looked him up and down. 'Oh son, you look a real bobby dazzler!'

He waltzed towards her, took hold of her hands and pulled her to her feet. 'What do you think?' he said, as he spun her around the floor.

'Oh don't be silly!' she said. 'I'm not a young girl any more!' But Jack noticed the sparkle in her eyes. She was on the heavy side, but it was no effort to whisk her around. As they came to a halt, she leaned forward to plant a kiss on his cheek and breathed in his aftershave. 'You smell good enough to eat, son!'

'Get away, Mother, you're biased! Now how about a nice cup of tea before I go? The bus into town doesn't get here till seven.'

'All right, Jack, you can read the paper while I'm gone. Now where did I put the *Herald*? It was around here somewhere.'

'It's on the sideboard, Mother.' He picked up the paper and waved it at her.

'Oh yes, there it is. Have a good read while I get the tea. I won't be long.'

Jack perched on the edge of his mother's armchair and began to read. A truck driver had found the Lindbergh baby dead in a wood in America and the news wasn't much better at home. The *Herald* was still full of violent details from that Dartmouth prison revolt, but at least the convicts had been sentenced now – and not before time either.





Mrs Wood picked up the tea caddy and thought about her son as she spooned his favourite Lipton's tea into the pot. He'd always been considered the baby of the family, especially by his sister, Ena, but now here he was, running his own joinery business and providing work for four men. Finding work in this Depression was no mean feat in Tyneside and, in striving to keep his business open, Jack was helping folks worse off than himself to scrape a living. She was proud of him and, if only his father had lived, he would have been proud of him too.

She took the butter and sliced ham from the pantry and cut two slices of bread. It's best he has something in his stomach if he's having a drink, she thought. She picked up the mustard pot. Now, I know he likes a bit of this on his ham. When she was satisfied everything was ready, she straightened her back and carefully carried the loaded tea tray into the sitting room.

Jack put down the newspaper. 'It's depressing news in the *Herald*, Mother. We're nearly halfway through 1932 and all we read about is trouble.'

'Stop it, Jack, you don't want to be thinking things like that when you're off to a dance. Here, have a sandwich. I know what you lads are like when you're let loose. You need to have something inside you before you go gallivanting.' She set the tray before him with a smile.

He was not in the least hungry, but there was no refusing his mother when she had made up her mind. Besides, his mouth was already watering from the smell of the ham.





He picked up the sandwich and took a healthy bite. 'That's delicious, you always know the right amount of mustard, Mother. But I can't stay here stuffing myself all night – I'll just finish this, then I'll be off.'

'That's right, son. You don't want to miss the bus.'

He polished off the rest of the sandwich and stood up, brushing the crumbs from his blazer as he did so. 'Now, don't wait up for me,' he said, as he bent over and kissed her. 'You never know, I might be late.'

She stood at the door and smiled as she watched her handsome boy striding down the gravel path with a spring in his step, whistling all the way.



Jack winked at two young girls waiting at the bus stop and grinned as they nudged each other and giggled. They were dressed to kill, in bright red frocks Jack guessed could be their mothers'. He bet they were going to the dance in the nearby town centre of Blaydon.

It was a chilly night and Jack was beginning to feel cold. He paced up and down, stamping his feet and rubbing his hands, chiding himself for not remembering his overcoat, but he cheered up when he saw the headlights of the bus lighting up the hedgerows at the side of the road. When it pulled up at the stop, he stood aside to make way for the girls. They giggled again as they climbed inside. Jack followed behind, looking for an empty seat. He nodded at the conductor, but was rewarded with a bad-tempered scowl.





Just as he bent to sit down, the conductor pulled the bell-cord and the bus took off with an almighty jolt, throwing Jack into the lap of a plump old man. 'Whoops!' he said. 'Are ye drunk already, lad?'

Jack wondered if the tetchy conductor had done that on purpose, but the old man was laughing so Jack joined in. At last it was time to have some fun, especially now there was no big sister at home to ruin it for him. He could hear Ena's voice now. 'It's too rowdy at those dances for the likes of our Jack.' Honestly, just because he'd let her teach him a few steps in the kitchen, she seemed to think she could keep him indoors like some kid, wet behind the ears. Thank heavens she'd married Peter and moved a few miles away to Dunston.

There was nothing to beat the excitement of a dance hall on a Saturday night. Jack had been to one or two before, but never at Blaydon. He wondered if it would be anything like the Oxford Galleries in Newcastle. He looked at the other passengers. It looked like most of them were heading to the same place. Lots of them were young lads like him, geared up for a good night out, and were in raucous mood – some had been at the drink already and were laughing loud enough to raise the roof. Jack had his eye on the conductor – the louder the lads shouted, the more grumpy he looked. Lads in the seats over the aisle from him had dark rings around their eyes and he noticed coal dust behind the ears of the ones in front. He bet they were miners who'd hurried home from day shift to clean themselves up





for the dance. Thank God I'm lucky enough not to have to dig around in the dark, just to keep somebody's coal house filled, he thought. Mother always says they don't pay the men enough for what they have to put up with down there.

One of the lads across from him caught his eye and grinned. To Jack's surprise, he got to his feet and turned round to address the others. 'Come on!' he yelled.

The bus conductor marched up the aisle and glared at him. 'Sit down!' he shouted.

'Keep yer wig on!' he yelled back, then turned again to the others. 'Yas ahl kna' this!' He threw back his head and burst into song.

'Ah went to Blaydon Races, 'twas on the ninth of Joon,
Eighteen hundred an' sixty-two, on a summer's afternoon . . .'

His voice was deep and gritty and the lads cheered him on. Jack stole a quick look at the old boy beside him, wondering how he was coping, but he was smiling from ear to ear. The conductor, on the other hand, looked ready to explode.

As the lad reached the chorus everyone joined in the Geordie anthem:

*'Ah me lads, ye should see us gannin',
Passin' the folks upon the road just as they wor stannin';
There was lots o' lads an' lasses there, al' wi' smiling faces,
Gannin' along the Scotswood Roaaaaoad, to see the
Blaydon Races!'*





The old man was singing along with the best of them, his voice easily as loud as Jack's.

Jack grinned at him, but he couldn't help noticing the conductor's face – it had turned dangerously red and a vein was pulsing in the side of his neck. 'Keep the noise doon!' he yelled. 'Ah divvn' want to be had up for carryin' a load a drunks!'

Fair enough, Jack thought. But the bus was pulling into the main square at Blaydon and the lads were already on their feet, almost falling over each other in the rush to get out. I'll wait until the crush dies down, he thought, and stayed put in his seat, but the conductor was having none of that. He stood over Jack. 'If ye divvn' wanta get off,' he said, 'ye can mind the bus while we have wor tea.'

Jack got the message, quickly got to his feet and stepped down onto the busy pavement. Darkness was falling, the air was crisp and the street lamps were shining on the merrymakers as they headed towards the dance hall. Jack put his hands in his pockets and sauntered past a group of girls in their special Saturday night dresses. The heavy scent of their perfume enveloped him as he glanced surreptitiously in their direction. But he wasn't alone – lots of lads were gaping at them, weighing up their chances. Expectation filled the air and Jack quickened his pace. He patted the wallet in the inside pocket of his new jacket and looked forward to a nice brown ale.

As he had never been to a Blaydon dance before he thought it best to keep up with the others. He followed the





noisy crowd to the end of the street and stayed with them as they crossed over the road into a narrow pathway along the side of St Joseph's Catholic church.

Iron gates opened on to what seemed like a small recreation ground. For a moment, Jack wondered if he had come to the right place, but he could hear music drifting in the air and the crowd was surging forward, so he hurried after them. At the far end of the tarmacked ground stood a rambling building, with an impressive arched doorway. 'Blaydon Church Hall' was lit up in flashing lights around the arch.

Jack joined the queue to buy his ticket. He stamped his feet on the tarmac to warm them up and a young man in front of him turned around. 'Cahd, isn' it?' He held out a packet of Woodbines. 'D'ye fancy a tab, bonnie lad? Go on, help yersel', Ah've got a whole packet.'

'Thanks all the same, but I don't smoke.' A look of disappointment crossed the young man's face and Jack added hastily, 'But I wouldn't say no to a nice beer.'

They moved through the arched doorway into a mosaic-tiled hall. It wasn't much warmer in here, but at least they were at the front of the queue. The young man winked at Jack as he went up to the ticket counter. 'It winnit be lang till ye can wet yer whistle, Geordie, Ah'm next.' He took out a shilling, slapped it on the counter and picked up his ticket. 'Gan on,' he said, 'it's your turn and mind ye divin' get drunk.' He slapped Jack on the back and disappeared inside.

Jack paid for his ticket and joined the crowd squeezing through the doorway at the end of the hall. As he pressed





forward, a wave of heat and noise surrounded him and he felt a heady rush of pleasure. At last he was in!

The ballroom was completely packed. Dancers filled the floor and every seat at each small round table surrounding it was full. He elbowed his way across the floor to reach the stage at the other end of the room. The band that night had a great reputation and the crush was even greater near the front as people jostled to get close.

The musicians certainly looked the part in their smart black suits and bow ties, belting out the latest tunes for all they were worth. A pretty girl sang into the microphone trying her best to be heard above the noise. Jack thought her a knockout, with her long black hair and slender figure. She wore a flimsy dress in black and silver, cut low at the front, with shoe-string straps. A glitterball hung from the ceiling, covering her in delicate snow-like flakes. She reminded Jack of the Snow Queen at his first pantomime. He had been just six years old when his mother had taken him to the Theatre Royal that Christmas and he could still recall the magic of it.

But now it was time for a drink. He pushed through the dancers again to reach the crowded bar. Four hard-pressed waiters, with shirt sleeves rolled up to their elbows, were pouring out Dutch courage to lads who looked like they needed it. Jack had to admit he was one of them. He waved a ten bob note to get the barman's attention. 'When you're ready,' he called.

'Had on, hinny, can ye not see Ah'm run off me feet?'





‘In your own good time. And have one yourself.’
That did the trick. The barman was with him in seconds.
‘Cheers, bonnie lad, what’s yer poison?’

‘Newcastle brown ale, what else?’

‘Good choice.’ The waiter poured the clear, cold liquid into the glass and placed it carefully on the counter. ‘That’ll put the lead in yer pencil, lad!’

Jack took a deep gulp of his favourite beer. He needed that! But there was no use standing here all night – this wouldn’t find him a lass to dance with. So he pushed back through the crowds, careful not to spill his drink down some bonnie lass’s best new frock. He stopped at the edge of the dance floor – there were a lot of bonnie lasses, he’d never seen so many! Some of them were dancing together so it looked like men were in short supply and if that were the case, he shouldn’t have a problem.

A loud burst of hysterical laughter made him turn. A group of girls were huddled around one of the tables at the side of the dance floor. Should I try my luck, he wondered, as he moved closer to the table. One of the girls caught his eye and smiled at him. ‘Ah’m Ruby,’ she said. ‘They’re playing a foxtrot. D’ye fancy a dance, canny lad?’

Could she be talking to him? For a moment he wasn’t sure, but then she slipped her arm through his. ‘Well!’ she went on. ‘What about it?’

‘Why not?’ he heard himself say.

Ruby steered him towards the floor. ‘What’s yer name, bonnie lad? Ah’ve never seen you here before.’





‘My name’s Jack Wood. Pleased to meet you.’ He looked her up and down. Ruby was a pretty girl, with long brown hair. She was wearing a dress that accentuated the colour of her green eyes. It was just the right length to show off her shapely legs as he took her in his arms and began whirling her around the floor.

He was racking his brain for something to say, something sharp but not too clever, when a line from a film came into his head and he decided to try it out. ‘Do you come here often, Ruby?’ He smiled at how easily her name had slipped from his lips.

‘Ah come ’ere every Sat’day. Why d’ye want to know anyway? Are ye tryin’ to get off with us?’

Jack flushed. ‘I’m sorry. I hope I wasn’t too forward.’

She gave him a knowing smile. ‘Divvn’ worry, pet, yer alreet. Ah like a man wi’ manners.’ She nuzzled up to him. ‘Ye divvn’ get many in this place.’ Then, without warning, she tightened her grip around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. Jack stumbled in surprise and missed his step, landing heavily on Ruby’s foot. She cried out and they came to a halt so suddenly the couple behind bumped into them. The man glared at him. ‘Watch what yer doin’, ye dozy bugger!’

Only a moment ago, Ruby had been smiling at him, but now she screwed up her face and pushed him away. ‘Bloody hell!’ she yelped. ‘Ye’ve laddered me best stockin’s. What’ve ye got on yer shoes? Hob nails?’

Jack tried to hide his humiliation as he held his hand out to Ruby. ‘Please, let me help you.’





She snatched her hand away and limped off to find a seat. Jack followed behind, hoping to make amends, but Ruby pushed him away again. ‘Yer no bloody good, are ye? So bugger off and ye needn’t bother asking us again either!’

Jack slinked back to the bar with his tail between his legs. He pulled his wallet from his pocket and rummaged inside for a note, looking out for the barman he’d charmed earlier. A man standing next to him nudged his arm. ‘Never mind the drink,’ he said, ‘just wait till ye get a load of what’s comin’ on next!’ He nodded towards the floor. ‘She’ll knock yer bloomin’ eyeballs out, lad.’

‘Who’s she then?’

‘Keep yer shirt on,’ the man said, ‘ye’ll find out soon enough. She’s hot stuff, Ah can tell ye.’

The room quietened as the band stopped and the MC ran up the steps on to the stage. He was a tall, thin man in a tight black suit, his hair parted in the middle and flattened to his head with Brylcreem, reminding Jack of a mannequin in Burton’s window. ‘Good evening, boys and girls!’ he said. ‘You won’t have to wait much longer to see the main attraction! They’ve just won their latest competition and here they are to celebrate at their favourite venue, with their greatest fans!’

‘So, Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome our ballroom champions for the North East, none other than Earl Dixon and Alice Rooney! Let’s hear it for them – Alice and Earl!’





The band struck up with the staccato rhythm of a tango, and as the audience broke into applause, Jack turned away from the bar and moved back to the ballroom. He was curious to see what a champion dancer looked like.

He joined the crowd as they formed a circle around the edge of the floor. The lights went out and a hush fell over the room. A drum roll began, quietly at first, then built to a crescendo as a spotlight lit up a couple in a striking pose. They stood as still as statues, reminding him of a figurine on his mother's sideboard. Their heads were at sharp right angles to their bodies as they looked down the length of their outstretched arms to their firmly clasped hands. Earl Dixon had one arm around his partner's slender waist, her hand resting on his broad shoulder. Jack noticed her long, slim fingers with the nails painted bright red. His mother had never allowed his sister to wear that colour.

He had never seen anyone like Alice Rooney before. She looked like a model in his sister's *Vogue* catalogue. Maybe it was the crimson flower she wore in her hair or perhaps it was the bright slash of scarlet lipstick. Whatever it was, he would have to get closer. He began to ease his way to the front. He couldn't wait to see what this woman would be like in action. As the dance began, he pushed his way through the cheering crowd until he found an unrestricted view. Alice Rooney was as glamorous as a film star. She looked like she had been poured in to the red dress she wore: it clung to her slim body, dipping low at the back, showing off her flawless skin. The





shoulder straps were flimsy and sparkled with diamanté. Her golden blonde hair rippled over her shoulders and her eyes lit up as the rhythm of the tango took possession of her, and she allowed Earl Dixon to lead her through a series of perfectly rehearsed steps.

Jack couldn't take his eyes off her. She was as light as a feather in the arms of Earl as she followed his every move. Earl was good-looking enough and a strong dancer, but Alice's raw magnetism drew every eye to her performance. Jack could tell she was all woman, whereas the girl whose toes he had trodden on earlier had been just that – a girl. He cringed when he recalled his clumsiness, but all thoughts of the girl were chased away again instantly by Alice. He hardly noticed Earl Dixon, except that he was Alice's partner, the lucky man who held her close or flung her away from him before reeling her back in to his arms again. I'd give anything for just one dance with her, he thought, imagining himself in Earl Dixon's shoes.

He was brought back to earth as the music suddenly stopped. The dance had ended and the couple were holding their final pose, Alice leaning seductively backwards over Earl's strong, outstretched arm. For a moment or two they remained still, until Alice moved slowly and gracefully to an upright position. When Earl led her forward to take their bow, the audience went wild. The applause seemed to go on forever.

And now Alice and Earl were smiling and stepping, in separate directions, from the centre of the floor. Jack's eyes





followed Alice. The audience parted like the Red Sea as she threaded her way through the crowd and sat down at a small table on the edge of the dance floor. She had hardly taken her seat before she was surrounded by a throng of admirers. Jack hung back and watched as she acknowledged the compliments. Then, when the last of her fans had melted away, he gathered up his courage and walked slowly over to her table.

He cleared his throat. He had never felt so nervous, but he wasn't going to let a chance like this slip through his fingers. 'I hope I'm not intruding, Miss Rooney,' he began, 'but I just had to tell you how much I enjoyed your performance and how lucky Earl Dixon is to be your partner.'

Alice looked as if she was about to laugh at his formality, but then seemed to think the better of it.

'Thanks for the compliment, pet! D'ye like dancin'?' 

He nodded. 'I do like dancing. But I'm nothing special – I mean, I'm not up to your standard.'

'It takes a lot of practice,' she said. 'What's yer name, anyway?'

'Jack Wood. And I know yours. It's Alice, Alice Rooney, isn't it?'

'That's right.' To his surprise, she stood up. 'Well, now we know each other, come with me, Jack Wood. They're playing a nice slow foxtrot. Let's see what you can do.' She took his hand. Well, she's not backwards in coming forward, he thought.

He tried to keep his nervousness from showing as they walked on to the floor. Pray to God he didn't make a fool of





himself and tread on her champion toes – he'd be thrown out of the hall for sure.

But he needn't have panicked. It was wonderful dancing with Alice. Her vitality was infectious, and after a few tentative steps, he felt a burst of energy flood through him and he began to pick up the pace. He knew they made an attractive couple, and soon realised that the nerves had vanished and he was actually enjoying himself. It would have been impossible not to have a good time, when she danced so expertly that some of it rubbed off on him, and instead of feeling like he had two left feet, he felt so right in his skin. He breathed in her scent as she leant her head on his shoulder. It was Coty, just like his sister Ena wore.



They stayed on the floor for two dances in succession, a foxtrot and a quickstep. When the music stopped, she gave him a provocative look that was far from sisterly.



He would have had to be stupid not to read the blatant signal, the flare of interest in her eyes. Jack was sure it had nothing to do with dancing. All of a sudden, he felt ill at ease. She wasn't his type, he realised – too forward and too hot to handle. His type were sweet and shy. And when it came to girls, he preferred to do the choosing.

Alice snuggled up against his chest. 'You're not that bad, you know. Ah think Ah could do somethin' with you.'

Jack didn't like the sound of that. No, this lass was definitely not for him. He would have to find a polite way to excuse himself. At that moment the band leader announced





the last waltz. Saved by the bell, he thought. A last dance and he'd be off.

Alice spun in his arms to the strains of the waltz. He had to admit, she was an amazing dancer and, to be fair, the evening had had its moments. Even so, he knew it would be wise to make a swift exit. When the waltz ended, he let his arms fall to his sides, took a step back and looked around. The crowd in the hall was thinning as couples trickled out into the night.

'It's time I was off,' he said. 'Thanks for the dance.'

But Alice held on to his arm. 'Just a minute,' she said. 'Wait till Ah fetch me shawl.'

Taken aback by her pushiness, he missed his moment to escape. He had planned to leave alone, but now that he found himself nodding his head, he felt obliged to do as she asked and wait for her. That would be the polite thing to do.

Alice headed to the ladies' cloakroom, returning in no time with her shawl over her arm and her face covered in smiles as she saw him still waiting for her.

Once outside, Jack sighed with relief. The cold air had cleared his mind and he was thinking of a polite way to say goodbye to Alice, when her voice broke in to his thoughts.

'If you're walking me home, pet, let's go by the canal.' She cast him a sideways look, which might have served as a warning if he'd caught it.

He was walking with his hands in his pockets, striding ahead of her.





‘What’s the hurry?’ she asked, and linked her arm through his to slow him down, humming one of the tunes they had danced to.

They made slow progress along the tow path, Alice looking at the houseboats moored by the bank. Most of the occupants seemed to have gone to sleep already, although one or two still had lights showing in the cabins.

They were at a point beyond the houseboats, when Alice stopped suddenly and reached down to fiddle with her ankle.

‘Would ye believe it, the strap’s snapped on me shoe!’

She made a show of hobbling a few paces to the shelter of some willow trees, set back a little from the bank, and sat down under a leafy canopy of trailing willow branches, practically inviting him to join her. Jack crawled in beside her and knelt at her ankle to see if he could help.

‘Looks like a buckle’s come undone,’ he said, but as he fumbled at the strap, she took his face between her hands, and tilted her face towards his.

And in that fateful moment, Jack obliged by kissing her. Where was the harm in it, he asked himself. He’d give her a kiss goodnight, and then be off.

But the kiss was more than he’d bargained for, a kiss that she took control of and deepened. After a while she pushed him, playfully, so that he lost his balance and was no longer kneeling, but lying beside her on the grass under the willows. She eased the straps of her dress from her shoulders, revealing the top of her milky white breasts, the



breasts which had been pressed against his shirt front while they were dancing. She pulled him towards her, guiding his hand under the flimsy red fabric of her dress on to the cool, bare skin of her thigh. Desire swept over him.

The moment it was over, he was struck with remorse. He already regretted his weakness. And prayed there would be no consequences.



PART 1



Chapter 1

Newcastle upon Tyne, 1933

Jack walked along the depressing street looking for number 14. His boots felt like lead as he made his way through the cheerless, rundown neighbourhood. He felt the urge to turn back, but no matter where he went, there'd be no escape from the predicament that awaited him. To think this was only a short walk from his own house, yet a whole world away from what he was used to.

His heart sank when he saw the house. It was just like all the rest, with paint peeling from the doors and window frames. Water was dripping steadily onto the pavement from a loose gutter and as he jumped back it splashed on to his boots. A scraggy cat came from nowhere and nuzzled up to him, before lapping water from a hole in the pavement.

He wanted to turn and run, but as he paused for a moment, the door opened. A young girl, about fourteen, with a tousled mop of limp brown hair, smiled shyly at him. 'Ah'm Peggy, Alice's sister,' she said.

Jack wondered if he had heard right. She didn't look a bit like Alice.

'Come in,' she said.



He followed her through a narrow hallway into a shabby front room. ‘Sit down,’ said Peggy. ‘Mam won’t be long.’ She smiled shyly at him once more and disappeared.

Jack gritted his teeth and lowered himself onto a frayed and sagging sofa. As his eyes got used to the gaslight, he couldn’t help noticing that the carpet and curtains were begging to be cleaned.

‘Well, well, Jack Wood!’

He jumped at the sound of the grating voice. A thin elderly woman stood in the doorway, holding a bundle in her arms. She stared at him through piercing blue eyes, tightening her lips as though ready for battle.

Jack stood up. ‘You must be Alice’s mother.’

‘So! Ye got my message then. Ye thought ye’d show yer face, did ye? And not before time either! Ye should be ashamed of yersel’. Have you any idea what my lass has been through? Here – take yer little bastard. An’ Ah hope yer proud of yersel, Jack Wood!’

Jack could hardly register he was being handed a newborn baby. He stared at the cream shawl, but the baby was so tightly swaddled he couldn’t tell what it looked like. He felt sweat prickle under his collar.

Mrs Rooney glared at him. ‘Have yer nowt to say for yersel’? My lass nearly died havin’ that bairn! Did ye know she’s got a bad heart? A fat lot you care! Your bairn’s that little she could fit into a bloody pint pot – it’s lucky she wasn’t any bigger or she coulda killed wor Alice!’





Jack lowered his eyes. 'I'm sorry Alice has suffered so much, Mrs Rooney, and I hope she soon feels better.'

'Ye cannat pull the bloody wool over my eyes by comin' the gentleman, with "Ah'm sorry", oh no, yer not foolin' nobody. Ah know your kind, buggerin' off when ye've had yer way!' Mrs Rooney's words poured out like scalding water from a kettle.

To Jack's relief, the door opened and a small, stout woman came into the room. 'Ah'm the midwife,' she said. 'Ah thought Ah'd better come for the bairn, seein' as you've matters to sort out. Besides, she'll be needin' a feed now her daddy's seen her.'

Jack blanched at the word 'Daddy' just as he had at the harsh sound of 'bastard.' He handed the baby over gratefully. She was in capable hands now – more capable than his. When the midwife left the room, he felt the urge to follow her and make a bid for freedom, but his conscience had obliged him to come, to put a proposition to Alice, so he stayed where he was and forced himself to look Mrs Rooney in the eye.

He took a deep breath. 'I'd like to see Alice. There's something I've got to say to her.'

Mrs Rooney glowered at him. 'She's not fit for visitors, you daft bugger! Ah've already told ye that bairn was nearly the death of her.'

Jack's temper began to rise. He had come out of decency, not to be lectured at, but to be fair and businesslike, and to deal with Alice, not with this battleaxe. But after listening to





her ranting, his idea of saying a few kind words and handing over a cheque to Alice, seemed naive.

Mrs Rooney stood with her arms folded, scowling at him.

'I'll be going then if I can't see Alice today. Maybe another time.'

'Oh yis! Ye'd like to run away with yer tail between yer legs and never be seen again, wouldn't ye? But my son wants a word wi' ye first.' Mrs Rooney opened the door and shouted upstairs. 'Martin! Get yersel' doon 'ere!'

Jack felt like a fly caught in a web, his heart beating a little faster as he heard heavy footsteps lumber down the stairs.

Martin Rooney filled the small room with his hulking presence. He was the same age as Jack and as tall as Jack's six feet but broadly built. His black, curly hair was unkempt, and his face looked as if it wouldn't recognise a razor. He looked Jack up and down.

'Why! If it's not Alice's fancyman showin' up at long last!'

Jack cleared his throat. 'I'm just off as Alice isn't well enough for me to see her.'

'And are ye takin' yer squealin' little bastard with yer? Or are ye just creepin' off, leavin' us to cope?'

'Well . . . as a matter of fact, I was going to give Alice something.'

'Ye've givin my sister somethin' already and ye'd better not try an' get away wi' it! Flashin' yer money to get yersel' outa trouble! That bairn and my sister'll need a roof over their heads!'





‘And how do I even know the bairn’s mine?’

The moment the words left his lips, Jack knew he had given Martin Rooney the excuse he had been itching for. ‘You callin’ my sister a whore?’ He pushed Jack against the wall, ramming an elbow against his throat and pinioning him there. Jack pulled at the muscled forearm to stop himself from choking but Rooney leant on him, breathing into his ear.

‘Ah know ahl about what went on ’tween the two o’ you doon by the canal!’ he whispered. ‘An’ now ye’ll pay for the fun ye helped yersel’ to!’

He gave another vicious shove at Jack’s windpipe before allowing his mother to pull him off.

‘Divvn’ be daft, Martin, that’s no way to fettle things,’ she said as she watched Jack spluttering to regain his breath.

He rubbed his throat and straightened his twisted shirt collar, trying to recover his dignity, but his breathing was coming fast, rasping in his throat.

‘Leave him to me,’ said Mrs Rooney. ‘Ah’ll mak’ sure he makes an honest woman of your sister.’

Suddenly she was pushing and shoving at Jack, manhandling him towards the door. ‘Gan’ on, then, since you’re in such a hurry to leave. Bugger off! Jus’ mak’ sure you come back and tell us your plans for Alice and the bairn. Think on! She’s your little bastard and don’t you forget it!’

Martin opened the front door and Mrs Rooney pushed Jack in the small of his back, sending him stumbling over the threshold and into the street.





He scrambled to his feet, breathing in the icy February air, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he limped away from the ugly scene more shaken up than he'd like to admit.

What a pair those two were, he thought. Rough as badgers! So they were Alice's family, the hard-bitten mother and brother, and the shy little sister who looked like she wouldn't say boo to a goose.

'How have I got myself entangled with the likes of them? What a mess I'm in,' he muttered to himself. He pulled his jacket collar up over his ears against the cold, jammed his hands in his pockets, and lengthened his stride. He couldn't wait to get home away from this nightmare.



Jack's father had bought The Lilacs, a large solid brick-built house just outside Blaydon, when he was a young vet so that he could run his practice there and nurture the family he and his new wife had looked forward to. They'd had three children, but Mr Wood had died when his youngest son Jack was only six.

The lilac trees on either side of the gate, which gave the house its name, seemed to beckon to Jack, their branches waving him on down the path, with every crunching step on the gravel leading him home. He turned his key in the lock, shut the heavy front door behind him, and rested with his back against it for a few moments, almost weeping with relief. Then he took a grip of himself – lights were on





in the kitchen, and when he heard the murmur of friendly voices, he knew the family was here.

‘So, Jack, how was it in the lion’s den?’ It was his older sister Ena who spoke first, her brown curls framing her plump cheeks as she scraped back her wooden chair. She stood on tiptoe to give him a peck on the cheek.

‘It was awful. I regard myself lucky to come back in one piece.’

‘I warned you,’ said Ena. ‘I knew . . .’

‘Come on, Ena.’ Her husband Peter peered out from behind his wire-rimmed glasses. ‘Let the lad get himself a cup of tea and sit down before you start on him.’

Jack nodded at his brother-in-law gratefully. Everyone listened to Peter’s opinions, always delivered in the same measured tones. He could be mistaken for a school teacher in his old tweed jacket with the leather-patched elbows, but in fact he was a well-respected GP.

Jack’s siblings and their spouses were gathered round the oak table in the kitchen, with Mrs Wood at the head. Her usual kindly composure had obviously been shaken, and she was frowning as she presided over the big brown teapot. It looked like a council of war. His older brother Joe looked especially grim, his arms folded in front of him. His wife Annie squeezed his hand.

Mrs Wood cleared her throat. ‘As you know, Jack, I asked everyone here tonight to ask what they think we should do, as a family, to help you in your difficult situation.’





‘Thank you, Mother.’ He reached up to the kitchen dresser, and unhooked a cup.

‘I don’t believe for a minute that bairn’s yours,’ Ena burst out. ‘That family just want to get their claws into you, a nice boy from a respectable family. God knows who the father really is!’

‘Well, we don’t know.’ Jack looked away. ‘It could be mine.’

‘So what the hell were you thinking?’ A muscle twitched in Joe’s jaw. ‘Had you thought of the consequences?’

Jack raked his fingers through his hair. ‘I didn’t have time to think.’

‘Anyway, you should have known better than to consort with the Rooneys and their like. I’ve heard they’re a rough lot.’ Joe thumped the table with his fist. ‘All right then! Is it a question of money or are we in for a shotgun wedding?’

At the mention of a shotgun wedding, Mrs Wood put a hankie up to her mouth and stifled a sob.

‘I thought about giving Alice some money, Mother, but I didn’t even get to see the lass. I had to contend with the mother and her thuggish son.’ Jack tugged at his shirt collar. ‘Take a look, can you see the bruising? He damned near choked me!’

‘That’s no surprise to me,’ said Joe. ‘I was told in the Cross Keys that Martin Rooney’s been charged with assault in his time.’

‘But it doesn’t mean his sister is in any way like him, does it, Jack?’ his mother asked hopefully.





‘I know nothing about her if I’m honest, except she has a reputation as a dancer. Everybody at the dance seemed to know her and she’s won loads of cups. But I haven’t seen her since that night, so I just can’t say.’

‘I’ll bet it’s not just her cups she’s known for,’ Ena said.

Peter gave her a disapproving glance.

‘Anyway,’ said Jack, ‘they say it takes two to tango. She wasn’t in the least backwards at making her intentions clear.’

‘I’m sure she wasn’t!’ Ena said heatedly. ‘I’ll bet she knew she was on to a good thing! Alice Rooney is taking you for a ride. I know her type. You should have steered well clear.’

Mrs Wood wiped away a tear. ‘But what if it is your bairn, Jack? Is it a boy or a girl, son?’

‘It’s a little girl, Mother.’

‘Just listen to yourselves!’ Joe barked. ‘If you hadn’t mollycoddled him all his life, Mother, he’d have had more sense than to land himself in this mess.’

Jack leapt to his feet. ‘There’s no need to take it out on Mother, Joe, and you can all stop talking about me as if I wasn’t even here – I’m not a child.’

‘Sit down,’ Joe said, ‘and listen to what I have to say. What’s done is done. It’s what you do now that you need to decide.’

Jack nodded and sat down slowly. ‘I tried to offer them money to help with the bairn, but the brother and the mother want more than that. They want me to marry Alice.’

‘Rubbish!’ said Joe. ‘That’s just a negotiating tactic. There’s always a price to men like Rooney. Trust me.’ Joe was one of





the town's leading insurance brokers and prided himself on his ability to drive a hard bargain.

'We want to help,' said Ena. 'Just tell us what we can do. We won't let you be pushed around by the Rooneys.'

'Perhaps I should just do the decent thing . . . ' Jack put his head in his hands.

'I won't have my son go like a lamb to the slaughter. The Rooneys will make his life a misery.' Mrs Wood dabbed her eyes again.

'What about the bairn?' asked Peter. 'Let's say she is yours, Jack. Do you want to leave her upbringing to the Rooneys? From what I hear it wouldn't be the best start in life.'

'Peter is right,' Joe said. 'And do you want your bairn to grow up without a father?'

'You've changed your tune,' said Jack. 'A moment ago you were dead against me marrying the lass, you wouldn't even contemplate an association with the likes of the Rooneys.'

'Well, I'm beginning to think you might be in too deep already, Jack.'

Mrs Wood straightened her back. 'Perhaps we should at least ask the Rooneys round and talk to them face to face. Anyway, I'd like to meet Alice.'

'Hang on a minute! Why would you want to meet the Rooneys, Mother? That would be as good as admitting I'm responsible for the bairn. And what if I'm not ready for marriage and fatherhood?'





‘You might just have to grow up, our Jack,’ said Joe briskly.

Jack’s head was reeling. He looked at their faces, all focussed on him, all expectant. He thrust his chair back as he stood up and it fell over with a clatter.

‘I didn’t ask you to make my mind up for me,’ he said bitterly. ‘How about you all go to hell and let me make my own decisions!’

