



THE CALL OF
THE HUNTSMAN

NINA WHITEHOUSE

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Chapter 1

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After taking a rather long lunch, Alex Campbell was running late. He rushed into the estate agent office, which he managed in the centre of Nottingham.

“Did the Lambecote Grange client ring?” he called to his secretary as he ran through the reception area.

“No, Mr. Campbell, but the Bank called regarding Lambecote. They have an offer to split the house from the land and asked you to call the manager as soon as possible.”

“Good, Kim, put me through to him.” Alex sat at his desk and began to look through the paperwork awaiting his attention.

The telephone rang.

“Mr. White from Henderson’s bank is on line one, Mr. Campbell,” Kim said.

“Peter, how the devil are you?” Alex greeted Peter White, the manager of The Henderson Bank Group.

“Hi, Alex,” Peter White replied. “I need a meeting with your surveyor regarding Lambecote Grange—tomorrow, if that’s possible.”

“Sure. I am about to show the place this afternoon. This is the first viewing for some time. I was contacted online and asked to find all the relevant information regarding the past owners, going back at least two hundred years. If you have any details on hand from the deeds, I would be grateful. They were very insistent that I have them today and are due here in thirty minutes.”

“You are cutting it a bit fine, Alex,” White said, irritated. “You could have given me a little more time, but I shall see what I can do.”

Peter White had his promotion on the line over the bankruptcy of Lambecote Grange. He had authorised the deal to use the land as collateral for the one million pound loan the previous farmer had taken out, hoping to turn the farm into a golf course.

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

The previous owner, Edwin Sutton, had decided to leave farming when his herd of cattle were slaughtered after contracting BSE, known as mad cow disease. The farm had been in the same family for several generations. Plans to change the land into a golf course had hit one difficulty after another, and the business got deeper and deeper into debt as time went by.

Eventually, Edwin Sutton, who was well into his nineties, died. The death duties owed by his heirs, Andrew and Robert Sutton, put the farm into bankruptcy, and they were devastated when the bank refused any more time to repay the loan. They were declared bankrupt and the receivers had asked Campbell to value the land and farm as a working business and hopefully to return some of the creditor's money.

A consortium of businessmen interested only in purchasing the land but not the house had approached the receiver with a much reduced offer. An attempt to remove the land from the green belt was being considered by the local council. But this had to be handled delicately. Building large housing estates in this beautiful English countryside would bring opposition from neighbouring parish councils.

The deeds were brought out of the bank vaults, and Peter White read the back copies. He rang Campbell. "Hi, Alex. I have the details regarding Lambecote Grange. How far back do you want to go?"

"How far back *do* they go?"

"They go back quite a long way, probably four hundred years or more. Bingham was the family name before the Suttons. Why do they want them, do you know?" White was not happy with this viewing. There had been no interest in the last eighteen months. Farming was not a popular business venture these days. Prices had dropped through the floor as foreign imports flooded the markets. Selling land for development was the only real option if local councils could be persuaded not to object. With that information to take to the creditors meeting next month, he could get their permission to sell to developers at a reduced price. He had been promised a chance to buy a block of C shares if he could pull it off.

Campbell was very suspicious of White, regarding the sale of Lambecote Grange. He hoped this client was a bona fide buyer, if only to give Peter White a run for his money. White claimed the land was overgrown, and the house needed modernising. Campbell's gut feeling told him it would be best all round if the whole lot was knocked down and redeveloped. Someone would make a killing if that did happen, and Peter White would not be a million miles away when the shares were allocated if he could get the price reduced.

Backing for more than eight million pounds would have to be shown to the creditors if a bid were to be accepted. A consortium of businessmen had decided they would not let the green belt law, ensuring the land remain agricultural, stop them. They could always offer the argument to the planning department that affordable housing was paramount in their minds. Councillors would surely bow to pressure for housing on the outskirts of a major city.

His phone rang. "Mrs. Wiseman is in reception, Mr. Campbell," Kim said.

Campbell eventually came from his office, and holding out his hand in greeting, said, "I am sorry to keep you waiting, Mrs. Wiseman."

Frances Wiseman shook his hand and walked with him toward the door.

Outside in the car park, Campbell asked, "Would you like to take your own car, Mrs. Wiseman, or would you like me to drive? We have to travel almost fifteen miles to Lambecote."

"Oh, we can take your car. Did you manage to get the history of Lambecote Grange, Mr. Campbell?"

"Yes, indeed I did."

"How far back does it go?" Frances asked.

"Four hundred years I believe. I have not had the opportunity to read it myself. It has just arrived by fax this afternoon. Do you wish to browse through it whilst we are travelling?"

"No thank you. Before I make any decision on the previous owners, I would like to see the property," she said firmly.

Campbell thought she was a crackpot. He had a sneaky feeling this woman was just playing some kind of game. There were some pathetic people who liked to live in an imaginary world, and viewing expensive houses was their way of spending a day out in the country. There were a growing number of people trying to trace the family tree, and viewing property like this was a definite possibility for them to find information regarding ancestors who had lived and worked in service in houses in the Lambecote Grange category. This property was on the market in excess of eight million pounds, and this woman would have to have some hell of a backing to beat off the business men who wanted to buy it for as little as possible. Still, he had to show the property to everyone who asked to view it.

After some ten minutes of complete silence driving through the villages and hamlets, Campbell said, "We are just about to enter the Lambecote Grange land area, Mrs. Wiseman."

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

Frances looked around for something to jolt her memory. The stories her mother had told her as a child had haunted her for so long and could be based on happenings that occurred on this very land. Excitement rose in her chest. Her heart was beating fast, and she began to perspire.

“Would you open the window a little, Mr. Campbell?” she asked.

“Certainly,” he answered. “Are you familiar with these parts, Mrs. Wiseman?”

“No, not at all,” she said, moving her face closer to the open window. She was so hot. “How far is it to Lambecote?” she asked.

“We should be able to see it when we get to the top of this incline.”

The car reached the top of the hill with Frances strained to look out of the window. The sun was so bright she screwed up her eyes to focus. And then the vision appeared. There was Lambecote Grange in all its glory, just as she had pictured it in her mind. She gasped.

“Yes, it is a beautiful sight, isn’t it? I believe the place was quite something in its heyday,” Campbell said.

Frances was silent. She was sure this was the place.

They left the car in an overgrown area at the back of the house. As they walked around the west side of the property, which would probably have been the vegetable garden in the past, a twelve foot high wall built around the garden triggered a memory—the story of picking gooseberries with the housekeeper and bottling fruit grown in the garden. This was surely the place. She could not wait to get inside because she knew the interior of this house as certain as if she had lived here herself. “Could we enter through the front door, Mr. Campbell?” Frances asked.

“Of course,” Campbell replied, looking puzzled. This woman *did* seem to know just where to go. She was walking around these grounds with great authority. *Perhaps Mrs. Wiseman is a relative come to stake a claim*, he thought. Well, she would not be getting much from this legacy. The bank would take every penny they could squeeze out of any buyer. He opened the front doors and they went inside.

Frances remembered her mother telling her about the scenes on the front doors, heavily carved with equestrian motifs.

Once inside the most magnificent hall, she remembered the story of the huge Christmas tree standing beside the green Italian marble fireplace. She walked over to the fireplace and lovingly ran her fingers along it. Her eyes moved to the floor and the memory of the Italian marble tiles came flooding into her mind. As a child, Frances had no idea of the significance of Italian marble, but here in this perfect setting, the tiles

looked wonderful. Walking through to the dining room, she thought this must be where her grandmother worked when she first came to Lambecote Grange in 1890.

She ran around looking for the drawing room, and opening the door, stood speechless. A fireplace, constructed from beautiful white marble which covered the whole of one wall, stood regally in front of her. She ran over to one of the five full-length windows overlooking gardens, which were laid out in the style of Capability Brown. “Mr. Campbell, will you please open these windows?” Frances called.

Alex was convinced this woman was completely mad, running around looking for rooms and appearing to find just what she was looking for. He opened one set of the huge doors onto the garden.

Her heart pounding in her chest, Frances stepped out virtually racing into the garden her eyes shining in anticipation for what she would find next. Could this be “The Grange” where her mother was born in 1901?

The story of the bowl and her grandfather’s hunting horn had been Frances’s favourite bedtime story. The bowl had been given to her mother during the 1926 general strike in the Yorkshire mining village of Halten. Miners and their families suffered great hardship during this time, and Sarah Wiseman, Frances’s mother, had shown kindness to a poor woman who, when giving birth, had not had two shillings for the midwife. She asked Sarah for help. After paying the nurse, Sarah cared for the woman and her children and did not ask for a reward. But Sarah had always admired the bowl with the huntsmen painted around it. The picture of the huntsman blowing his hunting horn, followed by a pack of hounds was repeated around the large china bowl. This stood in the window of the small council house in Halten where Frances had spent her very happy childhood.

Frances hurried toward a clump of gorse bushes covered in yellow blossom. She eventually found a path through the gorse, leading out onto a lawn with the most beautiful views of rolling countryside she had ever seen. She stood quietly taking deep breaths. This was just what she had imagined she would find. Although overgrown and in need of attention, everything was as her mother had described it. For some reason the land had not been developed. Her mind was racing along, imagining a man in hunting clothes on a beautiful black stallion riding toward her saying, “This is your home, your rightful place in the world.” In her imagination, the huntsman had haunted her for years, beseeching her to search for this place. When life got tough, and Frances had many tough

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

times, she would dream of finding her mother's home and living happily ever after. Of course, it was just a dream. But she now had the finances to look for the imaginary place and at least lay some of ghostly memories to rest.

The fortunes of the Bingham family covered one hundred years of gentry and gypsies, love and hate, wealth and poverty, tragedy and social inequality. If this did prove to be the mythical Grange, she must act before it was too late. Lambecote Grange must not be lost at the eleventh hour to greedy speculators, and she must, if it was at all possible, save it. This was her destiny. All those years of deceit and treachery had come full circle. She could be standing on the very land where her mother was born into a wealthy landowning family in 1901 and lived a privileged life until she was five-years-old when tragedy struck and banished the family into poverty. Had Frances really solved the mystery of her mother's bedtime stories?

She must read all the history of this place before she committed herself but knew in her heart that this was the place. Could it be possible that she wanted so much for this property to be the house in her mother's story that she was making everything fit the picture in her imagination? This thought worried her, but she decided that the deeds would answer all her doubts. If the previous name on the deeds was Bingham then this was indeed her grandfather's land, and she had no time to waste.

Chapter 2

The Grange, December 1889

Charles Bingham reined in his horse, and after catching his breath, turned to look back. George, his son, was galloping his beautiful hunter, Storm, toward him over the frost-covered fields toward him. He felt exhilarated after his early Sunday morning ride around his land. He looked around, taking in the magnificent view. How he loved this place. He loved the smells that reminded him of his childhood when he would ride here with his father. Memories of picnics with his mother, and his two sisters, Grace and Lillian, came flooding back. He counted his blessings every time he rode around Lambecote Grange land.

The cold December wind chilled him, but he hoped it would blow away the heavy head with which he had awakened that morning. He had been presented with an exquisite hunting horn at the Hunt Ball the night before, inscribed in silver with the names of the last three hunt leaders, Charles, his father Henry, and grandfather William. He had lovingly hung the horn from its black velvet ribbon above the portrait of his father on the main staircase at Lambecote Grange. Charles, as the local squire, had been the toast of the ball and had consumed far too much alcohol. Not being a regular drinker he was suffering the consequences today.

“Are you all right, Father?” George called out to him.

“Yes, I am fine son,” Charles replied. “Shall we ride back together? I need to talk to you.”

Avoiding the main roads, they began to trot back to the farm together, enjoying the fresh air.

Lambecote Grange was on the outskirts of Nottingham, two miles from the beautiful English village of Lambecote. Charles was very well respected in the village. He was the main employer, farming three thousand acres of farmland and owning and supplying eight butcher shops in and around Nottingham. He was the absolute model of what the English

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

call “a gentleman farmer.” In the unequal class sectarianism of the Victorian Age, he lived a charmed life, having no concept of the poverty that surrounded him.

“Is there a problem?” George asked his father.

“No, George, I just want to talk to you about the business after I retire,” Charles replied.

“Retire! Why? You are not ill, are you?” George looked alarmed.

“No, George, I am not ill, but we should discuss the future plans for the estate. As your mother and I are not getting any younger, it is sensible.”

“Father, I don’t want to discuss this now. You are too young to think of retiring. We need to work together for many more years!”

“George, I want to start taking your mother abroad in the winter months. It will be a good chance for you to start taking over the reins. This land has been in the family for three generations. Your grandfather and my grandfather have been hunt leaders. I expect you to carry on the tradition. We have to learn to move with the times and keep up with modern farming changes, and it needs a younger man looking at it. You should be thinking about settling down, George. We need an heir to groom for the job.” Charles spoke quietly having carefully considered the responsibility he was about to put on his son’s shoulders.

George responded angrily. He understood very well where this conversation was heading and had no intention of listening to a word his father had to say. “I don’t want to discuss this, Father. I have not met anyone with the right attitudes for me and shall not be rushed into relationships with these spoiled overdressed women that you keep pushing at me. You wonder why I avoid family discussions when this is the only subject you feel you can discuss with me. Mother is obsessed with finding me a wife.”

Charles was not going to let this opportunity pass. “Good God man!” he shouted. “Half the women in the county are throwing themselves at you. All you give them is a smile, oh, and an occasional trip to the theatre. The best will be snapped up if you don’t pull your finger out.”

“I will decide when and whom I shall wed, Father, and that is an end to it.” With this, George angrily rode off, leaving his father to follow at his own pace.

Charles watched him go. He had to agree with his son. Most of the women that Charlotte, George’s mother, had invited to Lambecote Grange were empty-headed silly girls looking for a lifestyle rather than a

life-long commitment to a family.

Charlotte had insisted that Charles ride out this morning with George. She would not listen to his protestations regarding his unhealthy state and had great expectations of George taking a liking to her latest protégée, the daughter of a very well-respected family from Derby. She had been invited to the Hunt Ball by one of Charlotte's friends. George had been perfectly charming to the girl but had refused an invitation to visit her family in Derbyshire.

Charlotte would be impossible all day when he told her that George refused to discuss it. He would have preferred an easy day as he had this strange feeling in his chest—something that had been recurring quite regularly. He decided he would visit old Basil Judge, the family doctor, one day next week.

The horse was not happy about the valley into which they had started to descend. Charles encouraged him with a squeeze of his heels and the horse responded instantly, racing up and over the other side before dropping back into a gentle trot. Charles looked down towards Nottingham Road where a long procession of wagons was winding its way into Nottingham.

“Must be the Goose Fair,” he said. “The Romanies, gypsies, would not have this problem with their sons. They arranged their sons’ marriages. If they do not do as they are told, they are ostracised as gypsies. They have to leave the family and fend for themselves. Perhaps that was the best way to arrange for their future. Who knows?” George was becoming a problem.

Charlotte was obsessed with organising dinner parties and bridge evenings, hoping to find the girl with the right background for her son.

The horse slowly wound his way down to the road and then trotted alongside the well kept wagons that were painted in bright colours.

When he reached the leaders of the group, a swarthy-looking man called out to him, doffing his cap in the process. On their regular routes up and down their particular section of the English countryside, gypsies knew who owned the land.

“We shall put up in t’same field, sir! Two nights should do us, I reckon,” the gypsy suggested.

“Very well but remove your rubbish when you leave,” Charles replied.

“Will yer sell us some milk for t’bairns, sir?” a dark-skinned woman called to him.

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

“Just go to the kitchen door at Lambecote Grange. They will give you what you need.”

The woman gave him a toothless grin.

He said, “Good morning to you.” Then he rode away.

The Goose Fair in Nottingham would take place the following week. For the past five days, the gypsies and fairground people had been arriving from all around the country for the annual Christmas Goose Fair.

The sight heartened Charles. He would make quite a good profit during the next seven days, mainly in the butcher shops. He had purchased a stall at the fair that would sell hot peas, hot pies, and faggots. This had proved very successful over the years.

The farm workers who had very little work to do in the winter months welcomed the opportunity to earn a little extra money before Christmas, and it was possibly the highlight of the year for the country folk around Nottinghamshire.

The Romany women started early, selling their bits of homemade lace, promising good luck to the buyer, and doing a bit of duckering, fortune telling, from door to door.

Their men folk pitched their benders, tepee-style tents constructed of several poles leaning into the centre and wrapped around with strong waterproof cloth, and found grazing for the horses, which they had gathered from around the country over the last months.

Appleby in North Yorkshire was the main horse fair, but deals were struck at all the fairs. The Romanies selected the best horses from around the country to sell at Appleby. They never mixed with the fair people, and Romany women were not allowed to fraternise with *gorgios*, people not of Romany blood.

Romanies should not be mistaken with the tinkers, people living on the road but not of gypsy blood. They travelled around the country dealing in anything they could lay their hands on and generally giving the gypsies a bad reputation. Romanies were a proud race but true Romany gypsies were all one extended family of sisters and brothers.

Charles arrived at Lambecote Grange just in time to change his clothes before the carriage would be brought round for the journey to church. He, Charlotte, and their son George had their own family pew in the village church. George was approaching his thirty-first birthday and was the most eligible bachelor in the county.

NINA WHITEHOUSE

Horses were Charles Bingham's passion. He took pride in having the finest horses in the county. Hounds were kept at the farm, and such a large number of dogs meant extra pay for the farm workers. The wives and daughters of the farm workers served in the house and the dairy.

Charlotte had a lady's maid and a full complement of staff afforded to the wife of a man of such standing. Violet Grimwood was Charlotte's personal maid, and her husband, Arthur, was the blacksmith. They had two children, Nellie and Billy, who attended the local village school.

Elsie Buttle was Violet's mother and had been housekeeper at Lambecote Grange for twenty-five years. This position gave her and her family privileges not afforded the other estate workers. In return, Charlotte and Charles expected complete dedication to their family needs, and indeed, Elsie considered George with as much love and affection as she did her own flesh and blood.

Elsie held the purse strings for the smooth running of the household, and Charles trusted her implicitly. Charlotte professed to run the household, but in reality, Elsie hired and fired maids, and kitchen workers watched over by Charles.

Elsie's husband, Fred, was the stable manager. He also looked after the ploughs and other equipment needed to plant and rotate crops. Working horses had to be in tiptop condition, and Fred's skills were as revered outside in the yard and stables as Elsie's were in the house.

The whole workforce was expected to attend church on Sunday, gathering outside the litch gates to follow their master and his family into church. Only workers needed for duty were excused.

Violet, Nellie, and Billy Grimwood were in the kitchen on this particular Sunday after luncheon had been cleared away, all happily stirring the Christmas pudding and making their wishes. Elsie had wrapped the little silver three penny pieces carefully, and all the kitchen staff had dropped one into the pudding mixture, making a wish.

Little Nellie closed her eyes tight and shouted loudly to ensure the wish came true, "I want to be a lady when I grow up!"

Elsie, her grandmother scoffed, "Well that's one wish that won't come true. Yer fill that girl's head with all sorts of rubbish, Violet. Why don't yer teach her how to scrub a floor? She's too soft."

"Never!" exclaimed Violet. "I am not working here to pay for her education just to waste it on her scrubbing floors and being bullied by housekeepers!"

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

“Yer watch your mouth, Violet Grimwood.” Elsie retorted. “Yer are getting above your station. Just remember were you come from.”

“I do remember, and that’s not where I want her to go,” Violet argued. “Not if I can help it.”

“Well, madam, you can leave anytime you like!” Elsie, face beetroot colour now, bellowed at Violet, “Yer got this job ‘cos I put in a word with the mistress, telling her how well brought up yer were!”

“Yes, and I’ve seen the other side of life now, Mam, and that’s where I want our Nellie to be,” Violet declared.

Still feeling unwell and complaining of pains in his chest, the master had taken to his bed after luncheon. Charlotte admonished him for over indulgence at the Hunt Ball the previous evening.

Agnes Smith donned her cap and apron, and lifted the tea tray. She was the fourteen-year-old daughter of the pig-man and a not-very-bright kitchen maid. Agnes had a tendency to sniff a lot. Elsie only allowed her to go upstairs when Mary, the dining-room maid, took her day off.

Elsie thought it must be the smell that pervaded from her father, Jimmy Smith, who had caused the nasty habit in Agnes. “Come here let me look at yer!” Elsie bellowed at Agnes.

It had been a long day, and Elsie’s temper was short. Poor Agnes usually got the brunt end of Elsie’s tongue whether she deserved it or not. She had risen at four-thirty that morning to light the fires in the breakfast room and clean the kitchen stove before she stoked up the fire to heat the water for the family. She had prepared the vegetables for lunch before the very grumpy overweight cook rose at six, scratching and picking at sores on her arms and legs and giving Agnes a clip round her ear for not taking her a cup of tea.

Agnes scrubbed, cleaned, and dipped her knee to everyone. Mary, the upstairs maid, had the day off, and Agnes had to do her duties along with her own. Serving afternoon tea was a rare privilege for her. On Mary’s day off, Elsie usually served tea but she was too busy with stirring the Christmas pudding this afternoon.

Master was resting, and tea would be just for the mistress.

Master George had gone riding after luncheon. He had heard enough of his mother’s whinging about the lass from Derby whom she had presented to him with high hopes of a romance. Elsie thought the woman would drive the lad away if she persisted in harassing him about marriage. George was an independent character and would only marry

when he met the right girl. These snooty pieces his mother was parading for him irritated him with their pouting and preening.

Mistress said it put her off her food when Agnes continually sniffed, but the more nervous the poor girl became, the more she sniffed.

Elsie was too tired to take the tray upstairs. She and cook had not only mixed the Christmas puddings since luncheon, but prepared dinner and baked cakes and bread for tea.

“Get thyself upstairs, and for God’s sake, don’t sniff!” Cook shouted at Agnes. Cook had been at Lambecote Grange for six years, and was frequently at odds with Elsie, the housekeeper. Agnes slowly and carefully carried the tray upstairs.

“Come in!” Charlotte called, answering the timid knock on the door.

“Tea, ma’am,” Agnes said nervously.

“Oh, it’s you, Agnes. Where’s Mary?” Charlotte asked.

“Beg your pardon, ma’am,” Agnes replied, dipping her knee in reverence to this lady who terrified her just by looking at her. “It’s Mary’s day off, ma’am. She has gone to see her mam in Nottingham.”

“Does her mother live in Nottingham now? I thought they lived on the estate,” Charlotte said.

“Her mam had to leave when her dad died of fever last year, ma’am. Master wanted the cottage for the new ploughman so Mary’s mam went to live with her sister in Nottingham. Master looks after her with food and bits. Mary takes it when she has her day off,” Agnes babbled.

“The master’s too kind, Agnes. Too kind!” Charlotte exclaimed angrily, having no understanding of life outside her class. How poor Mary’s mother would live without the help from Lambecote Grange was of no concern of hers. “Agnes, have you taken tea into the master yet?”

Now flustered, Agnes had completely lost her composure saying, “Cook never said owt about giving master owt, ma’am.” Agnes’s face turned the colour of puce, and the sniff got worse.

“Well, just pop upstairs with a cup of tea for him, my dear. Here you are.” Charlotte passed the frightened girl a beautiful china cup and saucer with tea for her husband. “Run along and ask him if he would like anything to eat.”

Agnes took the cup with shaking hands and made her way upstairs. Outside the master’s door she stared at the tea that had spilt into the saucer, and looking around to be sure no one was watching her, she poured the tea from the saucer into the cup. *That’s better*, she thought, boldly knocking on the door.

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

She was not as frightened of the master as she was of the mistress. He was always kind and asked if she liked her job. There was no answer. She knocked again and again. After some time, she decided to put the tea down on a side table and go and tell the mistress that the master was asleep.

Charlotte said, "Oh. Just put the tea by his bed. He will drink it when he wakes."

Agnes went back upstairs and again knocked on the master's door. She then picked up the cup and saucer and quietly went into the room. "Excuse me sir," she said when she got near to the bed. She intended to put the tea down and leave, but did not want to catch him in some compromising position. Looking down at the bed, she immediately dropped the cup and saucer and screamed.

The master was half in, half out of the bed. His face was contorted in pain. He was a dreadful colour, his eyes bulging from his head. Agnes ran so fast her feet hardly touched the stairs. She was shaking from head to toe when she ran into the mistress's room screaming.

"It's Master, ma'am. Come quick. I fink he is deed."

It was a typical bleak misty-grey December day—perfect for a funeral. The funeral cortege, accompanied by a black carriage bedecked with black ostrich plumes and pulled by four proud black horses, wound its way through landscape that Charles Bingham had loved so much during his fifty-nine years of life at Lambecote Grange.

Charles was born on Lambecote Grange in 1830 and was the eldest son of Henry Bingham and his wife, Eleanor. He had been brought up in a very genteel environment knowing that as eldest son, he was expected to marry well and into his own class.

On his shoulders, he carried the responsibility of everyone who owed their living to Lambecote Grange. It was important for his family to maintain the structures that had governed this particular piece of English countryside for four generations.

After the death of his father in 1861, the farm had been left in trust for him to run and provide for all the dependants including his two sisters, Lillian and Grace. His sisters had married well, and had an annuity from the farm for life.

As the procession reached the field where the gypsies had camped just a few days earlier, a dusky man holding the reins of a piebald pony removed his cap and lowered his head in respect. Romanies in general

had very little respect for *gorgios*. Most landowners blamed Romanies for thieving and spoiling crops, but this gentleman on his last journey knew the difference between fair folk, tinkers, and Romanies.

The Romanies had a pride in their ancient race. They were honest hardworking people with their own customs, but the only thing they had in common with tinkers or travellers was that they lived on the road. The whole world was theirs, and if they were left alone, they would never harm anyone or anything that did not belong to them. The tinkers or travellers did not have these strong principles. They lived on the road and took anything that was not fastened down, figuring that if they did not take it, somebody else would. The Romanies would not camp with anyone not of their race, giving them a reputation of being odd. Charles Bingham had respect for the Romanies. In the summer, they worked hard on Lambecote Grange land, helping to gather in the harvest.

Standing at the back and around the sides of the church and spilling outside into the well-kept churchyard, the farm workers and their family's watched the landed gentry arrive in their splendid carriages. Women wailed at the thought of their men losing their work, and prayed that the son would be half the man his father was.

Charles was laid to rest in the churchyard in the family plot. After the service, the carriages made their way up to Lambecote Grange to pay their respects to the new squire and commiserate with the widow.

After the mourners left, the family solicitor arrived to read the last will and testament of Charles Bingham. All the family were congregated in the morning room. Charlotte was devastated. She had not been in her room since that dreadful day last Sunday, when the sniffy girl had burst in babbling the gruesome news of her beloved Charles' heart attack. She vowed she would only leave to travel to the funeral. She rested after the funeral, but George brought her down for the reading of the will.

George was worried that his mother would have a bronchial attack. He would take her away after they had had a respectable period of mourning. Charlotte would not be strong enough to come out of this and continue running the household staff. She had admonished him for not providing an heir for her beloved husband, moaning and groaning about her fate.

Aunt Grace and Uncle Ambrose were there with their son, Harold. Aunt Lillian and Uncle Edwin had been a power of help and kindness during the past week. Unfortunately they had no children, and Lillian had always doted on George. She found Harold, her sister's child, untrustworthy and sometimes downright rude when her husband would

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

not back his schemes. Aunt Lillian suffered with her heart. She was a very frail lady.

The house was in deep mourning. All the mirrors and main entrance doors had been covered in black and the drawing curtains had not been opened since Charles' death. The servants were in shock. Being in no such condition to work, poor Agnes had been sent home to her mother, and Elsie had not spoken a good word to anybody all week. She and cook had organised the food and the cleaning of the house. The house would be on show to the whole county after the funeral, and it was a matter of pride to the housekeeper for everything to be cleaned whether it needed cleaning or not. The staff had no had time to think about their future or to wallow too long on the master's demise.

Morgan Bryce, a senior partner in the law firm of Bryce Coombes and Braithwaite, rose from his chair and began to read the will. The whole estate was left to George, with some small legacies to the church and an old farm worker whom Charles had befriended. Charlotte was left an annuity with a proviso that she lived out her life at Lambecote Grange in the manner to which she was accustomed. The legacy was to continue to Charles' sisters, Grace and Lillian. This they had received since the death of Grandfather Henry.

One thousand pounds was left to Harold Sutton, with a provision that after his mother's demise her annuity would pass to Harold for the rest of his life. Harold Sutton almost burst a blood vessel when he heard this. He believed he should have a half stake in the estate. Grandfather Henry had left it to the male line, missing the female line, including his mother, but surely he was due for more than a measly one thousand pounds, and eventually, his mother's annuity.

Ambrose Sutton, Harold's father, had a very lucrative wholesale grain business. He had tried to encourage his son into the business in many ways, but Harold objected to working, spending most of his time in Nottingham, drinking, gambling, and womanising. He would lose one thousand pounds in a very short time.

George thanked everyone for their kindness and took his mother upstairs, away from Harold and his protestations.

January 1890

George sat in his office looking out over the snow-covered fields. His mind was unsettled. How he wished he had not angered his father when they were riding out on that fateful Sunday. He thought his heart would

break when he allowed his mind to recall the conversation his father tried to have with him. He had been so arrogant, riding off and ignoring him. Perhaps Father knew he had a weak heart and was trying to make provision for the future. Father had said that he wanted to take more time away from the farm. If only he had listened. George would never forgive himself.

After speaking with Fred Buttle and having been assured that at least until March the farm could be managed quite easily without him, George decided to take his Mother to Italy where she would recover from the dreadful chest complaint that had bothered her since Charles's death. He had assured her his father had intended to do this, remembering the conversation they nearly had on that fateful day two months ago. She had reluctantly agreed. He rang the bell, and Violet answered.

"Hello Violet," he said, smiling at her. "How are you?"

"Very well sir,"

"Will you ask your mother to come and see me?" George asked. "And please bring a tea tray with two cups."

"Yes, sir." Violet smiled back at George. *Oh. He is such a nice man*, she thought.

"What does he want two cups for? Who has he got in there?" Elsie retorted when Violet gave her the message downstairs in the kitchen where Elsie sat with her feet up in front of the large black cooking range.

"Nobody as I can see, Mam. He looks a bit down though," Violet answered.

"I'll take him some a these biscuits," Elsie said. "Straight from the oven. That'll cheer him up a bit, you see." Elsie knocked at the office door and waited to be asked in before she entered and put the tea tray down.

"Thank you, Elsie. Take a seat. Won't you join me in a cup of tea? And what is this? Biscuits? You spoil me, Elsie. You really do." George laughed.

"Thank you, sir. Are you all right, Master George?" Elsie asked. "I hope there's nothing wrong."

"No. No, Elsie, far from it! You and Fred do such a good job that I have decided to take mother away," he replied.

"Good idea, sir, if you pardon me saying so. Shall I pour, Master George?" Elsie asked.

"No." And passing her a cup, he asked, "Do you take sugar?"

"Yes, sir. Yes, please. Two spoons, if yer please." Elsie was beginning to get a little nervous now. *Why is Master George taking tea with me?* she thought.

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

“I have been thinking Elsie,” George said. “You could change things, rearrange things a little whilst we are away—for Mother’s sake.”

“I don’t understand yer, Master George. In what way?” she asked.

“Do not let her come across Agnes for a while. Poor girl, not her fault. But just the mention of her sets mother off with a breathing spasm.”

“I’ll use her in the dairy, sir. That should keep her out of the way,” Elsie said, feeling a little easier now. “Mary’s getting wed to a bloke in Nottingham, so we’ll need a new maid for the dining room,” Elsie informed him.

“Very well, Elsie, you see to it. Get somebody who did not know Father. Less chance of slipping up when she is serving Mother,” George said.

“Very well sir,” Elsie replied. “I’ll start getting Mistress’s trunk ready today. When do yer plan to leave, Master George?”

“There is a boat on January 31st. I think we could manage that, don’t you?” George asked.

“Certainly sir, I think that is a very good idea.” Elsie could not wait to get back downstairs and tell the news. She ran into the kitchen saying that she was in charge until March and that there were going to be some changes. “Mark my words!” she bellowed out as she strutted around the kitchen like the captain of a ship.

Cook groaned. “Yer had better not start on me, Elsie Buttle ‘cos I’m off first change that yer makes to me job!”

“Agnes is to go in the dairy, and I need to go into Nottingham and get a new dining room maid to replace Mary,” Elsie announced.

“Our Beatie’s lass is looking for work. I’ll ask her on me day off!” Cook declared beaming.

“Yer’ll do no such thing! I want somebody who looks like a lady. Not a spotty-faced ragbag,” Elsie spat at her.

Cook screamed back, “That’s it! Yer’ve gone fur enough, Elsie Buttle. I’m going!”

“If you want to go cook, yer go!” Elsie said. She had never liked cook, and certainly could manage without her dizzy spells and bad backs. She also coddled her gin too much for Elsie’s liking.

Cook stormed out of the kitchen, banging the door.

“Mam, now look what yer’ve done!” Violet said angrily. “We’ll never get another cook at short notice.”

NINA WHITEHOUSE

“We don’t need one!” Elsie said “Master and Mistress are going travelling at end of the month, and not coming back ‘til March. Why do we need a cook?”

“Have your way!” Violet said. “Think on, I’m not doing her work at all.”

“Yer’ll do as you’re told!” Elsie shouted at her, buoyant now with her new-found power.

George decided to ask Aunt Lillian and Uncle Henry to travel with them. Henry Braithwaite, now being a retired partner in the law firm Bryce, Coombes and Braithwaite, had on his retirement purchased a beautiful villa in Florence where he and his dear wife, Lillian, spent most winters. Lillian found her sister-in-law very tiresome. Charlotte constantly moaned and groaned about her fate now that her husband had died. Poor George had the patience of a saint when listening to his mother about her disapproval of his lifestyle without a wife and heir.

The carriage left Lambecote Grange on the 29th of January with its occupants set to travel by coach, boat, and train, taking in several European cities before settling in Florence.

George hoped the ladies would find other things to occupy their minds in Florence. He had become fearful for his mother’s health. Charlotte refused to eat properly and spoke only of the dreadful events she had witnessed when her dear departed Charles had left this world broken-hearted because he died without an heir to carry on the tradition of hunt leader. No amount of loving care could console her.

Elsie thought Charlotte was getting so much attention from the situation that she would carry on until she died herself. She decided to put up notices in all the Bingham butcher shops in Nottingham. She had to find a new maid suitable to serve the mistress her food. Charlotte was very particular who served her at table and had been known to refuse to eat her meal if the maid was not suitable. They must have references and apply in writing to Lambecote Grange.

The cook had left Lambecote Grange after several altercations with Elsie. She realised that life would be impossible with the master away.

Elsie Buttle reigned supreme—at least for a while.

Chapter 3

Nottingham, February 1890

Carrying her shopping basket, Rosina Morton walked along, her head back, letting the cold February wind blow through her long mane of dark brown thick curly hair. She was a striking girl who loved to be outdoors. Rosina was working with her sister, Gladys, at a vicarage in Nottingham. Gladys did the cleaning, and Rosina, general housekeeping. She always volunteered to do the shopping and was a very thrifty shopper.

“I do not know what I would do without Rosina,” Ophelia Kendall, the vicar’s wife, told people when they came for tea at the vicarage.

Rosina’s and Gladys’s parents, Kisaiya and Leonard Morton, lived in Nottingham. Len Morton was a good-for-nothing layabout. His wife lived from day to day on what little she could forage from cleaning and scrubbing. Kisaiya was a true Romany gypsy who fell in love with the wrong man and paid the price for her mistake. The gypsies disowned her, and her husband continually abused her. Kisaiya scrubbed for the butcher, Mr. Sykes, who ran the shop for Bingham’s farmer butchers. The butcher would give her a few scrag-ends of meat on a Saturday along with a wage of two shillings.

Rosina crossed over the road to the butcher shop. She was looking for a good piece of beef for the Sunday roast. Sunday was the day Rosina and Gladys had dinner at the vicarage. She would try to spend the meat allowance carefully, and perhaps she would have a bit left over to buy her mam a bit of something. She walked into Bingham’s and waited in the queue. Mr. Sykes saw her come in. He could not keep his eyes off her. She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

Rosina looked around at the meat hooked on iron bars that were drilled into the ceiling. The shop had a nasty smell, and the floor was covered in sawdust that had patches of dried blood festering. Several large blue bottles were laying eggs in the sawdust, and others were buzzing around in a feeding frenzy. She decided to ask for a piece of tail

end of rump having nice bit of fat on it. That usually went down well with the vicar.

“You certainly know your meat, Rosina lass,” Josiah Kendall, the vicar, would say when he was carving the Sunday joint.

A notice behind the counter caught Rosina’s eye. It read, “Silver service maid wanted.” She thought this was a funny place to advertise for a maid. Mr. Sykes was not married so it could not be for him.

After haggling over the price of the beef, the butcher reduced the price by two pence, and she put the piece of tail end of beef into her basket. Then, looking straight into the butcher’s eyes, asked, “Are these eggs fresh, Mr. Sykes?”

Sykes said, “Wait there just a minute, madam.” He was really turned on by this creature. If she played her cards right, she would eat well for the rest of her life—her snivelling mother along with her. “I have got some fresh duck eggs in t’back. Take some of ‘em. Vicar’ll love ‘em!” He could not contain his excitement. The spittle was stuck in the corners of his mouth. Ignoring everyone else in the shop, he blubbered and spat his way past Rosina to get into the back room, disappearing into the stinking area where a lad was boning disgusting-looking carcasses and making sausages, faggots, and meat balls made from any unusable waste meat mixed with strong seasoning to cover the smell.

Sykes roughly pushed past the lad swearing obscenities at him. He muddled through the mess on the filthy wooden block, trying to find bits of steak to impress Rosina. She loved faggots. Her mam sometimes brought them home if the butcher had any left of an evening. Kisaiya, her mam, said you had to be very careful with faggots it was dangerous selling them the next day, all the rubbish went into them ‘cos butcher never wasted an ounce of meat even if it had been on the floor. He would pick it up, scrape it, and put it into the ice cupboard. Ice was bought in every day, so the ice cupboard door always had to be shut. If they did not shut the door, the lads who worked there would have to pay for anything that went off.

Sykes came out from the back room with the eggs and a little parcel, which he put into Rosina’s basket. Giving her a wink, he said, “That’s for yer, pretty lass—a present like.”

Rosina’s back stiffened and her blood boiled. How she hated men who thought women could be bought by a bit of meat. “No thank you, Mr. Sykes,” she retorted. “I only want the meat I can afford.” She handed him the parcel and thanked him as she left.

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

Sykes was furious. Who did this little upstart think she was? He had never been so humiliated in his life. He would see her starve before he would give her family another sausage.

Rosina turned, held her head high, and flounced out of the shop, briskly walking down the back streets to where her parents lived in a dingy little two-up-two-down slum. Her father was sprawled out in front of the fireplace. The fire had gone out, and the room was very cold.

“Oh look who it is,” Len, her father said. “Lady Muck, been called to see t’peasants, have yer?”

“Where’s me mam?” Rosina asked.

Her father sickened her. He had been drinking and had probably spent her mam’s wages, earned last night scrubbing out that butcher shop.

“She’s gone to see if she can get more scrubbing. We can’t manage on t’ butcher’s throw-outs, I’m a big bloke. I need some real food in me belly,” Len scoffed.

Rosina rounded on him. “You are an idle fat good-for-nothing!” she shouted at him. “Why don’t you get out and find some work. Me mam will kill herself by not eating and giving you all the money she earns.”

Leonard stood up to his full six-foot-four. “Let me get me hands on yer. I’ll break your neck, yer jumped-up little bastard! Where did yer get t’money from to buy that fancy coat? Aha. Bet that vicar gets more than his dinner when his wife’s out doing her good deeds,” he sneered.

“You are disgusting, you foul-mouthed drunken animal!” Rosina was furious. “I am not working to keep you in idleness.” She stood her ground with her hands on her hips. “You won’t get another penny from me while you drink and gamble it away,” she shouted.

“Well, if that’s your attitude,” Len said. “Get out and don’t come back.”

Rosina groaned in exasperation, clenching her fists she left the house, slamming the door behind her. Gladys and Rosina had provided the rent money since they were eleven-year-olds. If she took him at his word, he would be homeless.

On her way down the passage between the terraced houses, she met her mother. Kisaiya had a threadbare old shawl pulled tight around her thin wan face.

“Mam,” Rosina said angrily. “Where is your coat? It is so cold out today. You will get your cough again.”

Kisaiya Morton looked sheepishly at her daughter. “I had to pawn it, lass. Last week we had nowt to eat.”

“Mam, why do you give me dad the money? He does not give a damn about you. He is so selfish, he makes my blood boil,” Rosina said angrily.

“That’s not all, lass. The butcher just gave me marching orders. He says to ask yer why,” Kisaiya said tearfully.

“What? The pompous idiot. I would rather starve than work for him!” Rosina exclaimed.

“It’s all right, yer saying that. But where do we get money to eat?” her mother cried.

Rosina was so angry. “Mam, there is a notice up in the butcher shop just behind the block. I think it was for a dining room maid. Who is it for, do you know?” she asked Kisaiya.

“It’s at Lambecote Grange, Rosina. Mr. Bingham just died, and I heard the butcher saying that his son has taken his mother travelling to recover from the shock.”

“Do you know where it is?” Rosina asked.

“I could take yer. We used to camp on that land when I was a bairn. Elsie Buttle is housekeeper there. She’s no man’s fool, Elsie. I wouldn’t want to work with her, but still, beggars can’t be choosers. It does say that yer have to write to her first. That’ll whittle it down a bit. Not many lasses can write.”

“Well, I can write and am no man’s fool either.” Rosina threw her head back in the way she did when she took on a challenge. “I think I shall buy some paper, pen, and ink and have a go at that, Mam. Me money would be good, and if I earned a bit more, it might mean you did not have to scrub for idiots like that butcher. Now come here, put my coat on and give me your shawl.”

“Nay, lass, I can’t take yer coat. I shall be all right.” Kisaiya shivered.

“Now, Mother, how much did you get for your coat at that pawnshop?” Rosina asked.

“Six pence,” Kisaiya said.

“What!” Rosina exclaimed. “I paid four shillings for that coat.” She glared at her mother. “Doctor’s wife gave it for the church jumble sale. I paid over the odds for it then so you would have a warm coat for winter. I am not buying it back again. Here, put my coat on and let us go and see what we can find.” She gave her mother the shilling she had made by shopping carefully for the vicar, and threatened that if Mam gave it to her dad she would not get anymore. Putting her arm around her mother’s shoulders, she said, “Come on, Mam, let us get some decent food. Our Gladys will be home soon, and she will go for me dad if she finds out you have had no food and he has spent the money on booze.”

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

“Rosina, shall we go to the market? It’s late and you can buy things a bit cheaper when they are packing up on a Saturday,” Kisaiya said, feeling humiliated. She wished she could be as strong as her daughters when it came to dealing with Len.

Rosina held her mother’s arm and shivered as the cold wind blew through her thin blouse. Her mother’s shawl gave no protection from the cold. “I hate me dad for doing this to us, Mam. Why do you put up with it? Nobody should live like this. I tell you I shall not live like this for any man. Why does he not go and find a job? There is work out there for everyone. You have to go out and find it,” Rosina mumbled as they walked along.

The vicar carved the beef at Sunday lunch after morning service and congratulated Rosina on her shopping skills saying, “We would miss you and Gladys sorely if you ever left us, Rosina.”

Rosina bit on her lip. She had not said anything about writing for the job at Lambecote Grange. Gladys had sneaked some paper from the vicar’s study while she was cleaning, and Rosina had written the letter while the family was at church. She had used the vicar’s ink. The vicar did not like waste so he would understand she could not spend money on ink when her mam needed medicine.

Since the day when Rosina had met her freezing cold and hungry, Kisaiya had been very ill. Rosina asked the doctor for something for her mam’s chest, and he had very kindly gone to see Kisaiya at no charge. Later, he told Rosina that her mother needed regular food or she would not have the strength to fight these chest infections.

Gladys had given her dad a real good telling-off and threatened to take her mam away and leave him to fend for himself. Things had looked up a bit since then, but Rosina thought that when Len got her mam on her own, he bullied her. She hoped the vicar had not found out about her trying for the job at Lambecote Grange. She liked working here at the vicarage, but the pay was poor and she had to live at home. Lambecote Grange was a live-in position. The food would be good and a uniform provided, Rosina really needed to get away from her dad. She hoped the vicar would not sack Gladys as revenge.

If Gladys could stay on at the vicarage, perhaps they would make her general maid in Rosina’s place. And they could take on her mam to do the cleaning. If her dad misbehaved, he would be on his own with no one to bully. The plan began to take shape in her mind. If she handled this carefully, it might just work. She decided to tell the vicar about her plans.

She knew she was jumping the gun, not having heard from Lambecote Grange yet, but if the vicar was put in the picture, he might look kindly on Gladys and possibly her mother as replacements. Kisaiya Morton was an excellent cook, and Gladys worked like a horse.

“Well, well, well!” Josiah Kendall exclaimed.

Rosina had finished her story about her wanting to work up at Lambecote Grange and set her mother and sister up for life there at his vicarage.

“What if I don’t want your family, Rosina? What if you don’t get the job at Lambecote Grange. You will be in a pickle, won’t you?” he said furiously.

Rosina’s heart banged against her rib cage. “I am being honest and aboveboard with you, Vicar. I expect to be treated fairly. I don’t want to leave you in the lurch. I need to help my mam and can’t do it without earning more money. I like working here, but it does not pay enough to keep our family. Me mam is a good cook. She taught me to housekeep and be thrifty with money, I am sure she could do that for you just as well, and with our Glad’s help, they could run your house together, costing you no more than it does now,” she said nervously.

Josiah was shocked,. He was used to people standing in awe of him, not planning out his life. Who did she think she was? He did not know whether to be angry, humiliated, or happy at the proposals that had just been put before him.

“I, err, will talk it over with my wife,” he stammered, brushing past Rosina. In his embarrassment, he left the room.

Rosina felt weak. She could not believe what she had just done. Where on earth did she get her ideas from? She just opened her mouth, and there she was telling the vicar how to run his household. She had better find Glad and tell her to start looking for another job ‘cos neither Vicar nor his wife was going to like this at all.

Ophelia Kendal listened to her husband. He jabbered on about how humiliated he was when Rosina dared to sort out a replacement for her job, providing she was lucky enough to get the job at Lambecote Grange. Ophelia liked Rosina very much and was not surprised that she wanted to better herself in this way.

“Josiah, sit down, my love,” she said calmly. “Think about what she has done. I admit it is not the usual thing for a servant to do, but Rosina is not a usual servant, as you have very astutely pointed out on many occasions. If those at Lambecote Grange are as adept at assessing human nature as you are, my love, they will jump at the opportunity to employ

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

this intelligent woman. She has fulfilled all her duties here with the utmost propriety, and we have come to rely on her so very much. She has tried to be sure that we will be taken care of to the standard that she herself has set here, by asking you to employ the one person whom she knows will be able to carry out the work—her mother.”

Josiah became calmer. His lovely wife had pointed out he had been astute as to choose this girl in the first place and then commented on her abilities on many occasions.

“We should help her in her decision, Josiah,” Ophelia pronounced.

“In what way, my love?” Josiah asked, growing in stature as he rose from his chair, his chest blown out with his ego.

His pretty wife twisted him around her little finger. “Well, perhaps if we could call on Lambecote Grange and give Rosina a character reference, Josiah. We have the knowledge that she will be honest and truthful to the Bingham family as she has been to us, my love.” Ophelia smiled lovingly at her husband.

“Excellent idea, Ophelia!” Josiah exclaimed. “Excellent. We will go today.”

Ophelia smiled to herself and left the room.

Lambecote Grange. February 1890

Elsie Buttle looked out and thought how lucky she was. The house was quiet. The work was done. The pantry had just been emptied and lime washed. So had every cupboard and drawer in the kitchen.

Tomorrow she would start the job of answering all those letters she had received applying for Mary’s job. *By gum, some of these lasses have a lot to learn*, Elsie thought. It was obvious they had gotten somebody to write for them. Even their Violet could not write like that and she was educated. They would not have time to learn. That is if they were half-decent workers. They would have to have been working since they were eight or nine-years-old. She would sort them out—no messing her around.

“One of them letters came on real quality paper,” Elsie told Violet whilst they were having lunch. “Now, where do yer think she got that from?” She laughed. “Well, she won’t get a reply. Her fancy paper doesn’t fool me.”

Elsie was in the middle of the dishwashing. She had to do most of this herself these days. Violet refused to do work because that job should have been done by a kitchen maid. Elsie also had to cook since cook had

left. “I’m saving money,” Elsie said, consoling herself when she began to get tired of doing everything herself. It was now February 15, and Master would be home the first week in March. She had to get herself organised and get some decent staff.

Violet came into the kitchen announcing that they had visitors.

“What!” Elsie retorted. “We do not have visitors. Everybody knows the family’s away. Who is it, for God’s sake?”

Violet laughed. “It’s the vicar from that church in Nottingham where Mary was wed. He’s outside with his missus.”

Elsie dried her hands, tidied her hair, and proceeded to receive the vicar on behalf of the family. This was an honour. Walking toward the front door, she felt quite regal.

“Good morning, sir, madam,” she said in her best voice.

“Good morning, madam,” Josiah replied, helping his wife from the carriage.

“I am afraid the family is travelling at the moment, sir,” Elsie trilled in an almost unintelligible voice—affected because she believed she had taken on the mantle of gentry to receive the vicar and his wife.

Ophelia assessed the situation in her usual way, realising that poor Rosina would not stand a chance with this silly woman. “How are you managing my dear?” she asked Elsie with a sweet smile. “What a responsibility you have here. If you need any advice or help in any way, my dear husband and I are at your disposal.”

Elsie was in her element. She could not believe her power. “Please come into the morning room. I shall have refreshments brought in. Yer must be tired after the journey from—” Elsie realised they had not said who they were, and she felt quite stupid. Should she admit she knew who they were or what?

Ophelia smiled sweetly at Elsie and said, “My dear husband’s position, as vicar in a Parish in Nottingham, gives us some free time at the week on occasions.”

“Of course,” Elsie replied. She was thankful for a chance to redeem herself from an embarrassing situation. “Would yer like to remove your cloak, sir?” she asked.

“No thank you,” Josiah answered quietly. “We will not be staying long as your master is unavailable. My wife and I have travelled here to give a verbal reference for one of your applicants for the job of dining room maid. I knew Mr. Bingham, God bless his soul, and would like to think that his poor widow is provided with the finest care in the county, which I am sure you are very well experienced to give her, Mrs. Buttle.”

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

“Thank yer, sir,” Elsie replied. “I was going to start that selection this very day and was not looking forward to making the decision myself. The mistress was in a very disturbed state when she left for Italy.”

“Well, worry no more, Mrs. Buttle,” Ophelia assured her. “If we can be of assistance in any way, we will be only too happy. It came to our notice only this very day that my maid of the last five years has applied for the position. Indeed, we are very distraught at the prospect of losing her, but when she told us that she had applied here, we realised how honest and trustworthy a servant we had. She has found replacements for herself to ensure that we will not suffer in any way when she has gone, as go she will when you meet her, Mrs. Buttle. There will be no changing your mind. My husband and I have travelled this distance today to ensure that you know what a wonderful opportunity you are being offered. Also to put our minds at rest that Rosina would be in good hands, and good hands she will be in with you, Mrs. Buttle. Of that I am sure.”

“My dear Ophelia,” Josiah said, taking his wife by the hand. He gently stepped between Elsie Buttle and Ophelia saying, “Not so fast, my dear. You are putting this poor woman at a disadvantage. She has to make a decision herself based on her own experience and not ours. Please forgive my dear wife, Mrs. Buttle. In her exuberance to help, I fear she goes a little too far.”

“No, not at all, sir,” Elsie quickly replied. “I am very grateful for the help of such revered people as your wife and yerself. Where could I find such a reference than in the church? And yer travelling all this way from Nottingham to help the mistress find a girl, to help the mistress recover from her poor husband’s death. I am very grateful indeed, sir,” Elsie said fluttering around the couple like a moth around a flame. “Very grateful indeed.”

A knock on the door redeemed Elsie from making a complete fool of herself, and Violet entered with a tray of tea and light refreshment.

The refreshments were taken with chitchat regarding the weather in their respective parts of the county. Elsie, pulling herself together, asked the name of the maid in whom they held such very high regard.

Josiah replied, “Rosina Morton.”

Elsie said she would find the girl’s application and left the room. She looked through the disorganised heap of applications she had received, and finding the one on good quality writing paper, she said to herself, *Ah, this is the one. Well, she can certainly write a good letter I’ll say that for her.* She proceeded back to the morning room and her guests.

“I have her application here on good quality writing paper. That says a lot about a person, I always think. Some of these girls can’t write a word. Vicar, yer would not believe the scrawl on the paper.” Elsie showed the letter to Josiah.

Josiah instantly recognised the paper from his desk and looked across at his wife who said, “Rosina has the use of my husband’s desk if she wishes to write letters, Mrs. Buttle. The quality paper is, of course, my husband’s choice.”

Josiah was happy to believe that his choice of writing paper had so impressed he forgot the fact that he would not have allowed Rosina to use it if she had asked or that the paper had been stolen.

“Perhaps yer could ask Miss Morton to call and see me, Vicar, as soon as possible. The girl has to be pleasant to the eye, being a dining room maid. The master would have the final say on the matter. If she is as yer describe, and I have no reason to believe that she is not, then she will be taken on a month’s trial.”

“We will bring her ourselves,” Ophelia said. “I am sure you will not be disappointed.”

“Ophelia, my dear,” Josiah said. “I have a funeral service tomorrow and cannot possibly leave the parish until next week.”

Elsie said, “There is a coach once a day from Nottingham. It arrives in the village at one o’clock and leaves the village at three. She can come on that. I will see her off, and she can return on the same day.”

“She will, Mrs. Buttle,” Josiah replied. Thank you for your attendance on my good wife and myself. We should make our way back to Nottingham before it gets dark.”

“Yes indeed, sir, and thank yer for travelling such a way on our behalf. The master will be told of your kindness when he returns,” Elsie trilled in the affected accent she had used when they arrived.

Ophelia sat quietly in the carriage on the way home. “You are very quiet, my dear,” Josiah said. “Are you well?”

“Oh yes, Josiah. Everything is very well indeed,” Ophelia smiled sweetly back at him.

Rosina stepped from the coach in the village of Lambecote. She wore the new plum-coloured suit she had bought when the vicar had told her he had visited Lambecote Grange and spoken with the housekeeper regarding her eligibility to be dining room maid. Rosina was very dubious. She had always worked hard for the vicar and his wife but thought

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

he was less than pleased when she told him of her plans regarding her family taking over the running of the vicarage in her absence.

Elsie watched her walk along the drive to the back of Lambecote Grange. Rosina, head held high and walking confidently, looked perfect for the job of dining room maid to the mistress.

Elsie had this feeling she had not made the decision herself, but God had somehow intervened in this. She had been so impressed by the vicar and his wife and she felt so important. "Just think, Violet. a vicar treated me like gentry," Elsie boasted to her daughter.

Rosina was very reverent toward Elsie. She was nervous and aware that she was being watched everywhere. She went into the house. Elsie questioned her all the while about her background.

One thing for sure, without the intervention of the vicar, Elsie would not have given her the job. Her background and address were far from ideal. The mistress would never hire someone with her background to take care of gentry. She would be lucky to work in the kitchen. Elsie gritted her teeth and agreed to give her a month's trial. After all, she could not go against a vicar, could she now?

Rosina was told to report for duty on March 1st, ready for the return of the family. No need to have her here any earlier because all the work had been done, and Elsie did not want the master to think she had had help with it. If he were going to bestow glory on anybody, it would be on her.

The carriage travelled along the bumpy road toward Lambecote Grange carrying the intrepid travellers returning from their European tour.

Uncle Edwin and Aunt Lillian were to stay at Lambecote Grange for several days to help Charlotte settle in, and face the memories that she must cope with for the rest of her life. Charlotte had used her grief to the full during their travels, but Lillian noted that when George was not around, she was much happier.

Charlotte insisted that she was not strong enough to deal with a new maid, especially one whom she had not had any influence over hiring. Of course, she usually did not have such influence, except when she was with her bridge-playing friends and proclaiming how she ran the household with a firm hand.

Poor Charlotte had never done a day's work in her life and had no knowledge of how much a person would be paid for pandering to her

whims and fancies. Her husband always let her believe that she was in charge of the housekeeping affairs.

George, aware of his mother's character, asked Aunt Lillian and Uncle Edwin to stay for several days on their return to Lambecote Grange. This would help his mother settle down into her usual routine of afternoon teas and bridge parties where she could recount her experiences of Europe. He had no doubt that she would soon forget the trauma of his father's untimely demise.

The trees were just about to burst into the fresh green of spring, and the fields were looking healthy with the spring wheat growth. George opened the carriage window and took a deep breath. Oh how he loved this place.

"Close the window, George. Do you want me to catch my death?" wailed Charlotte.

George put his face as far outside the window as possible, and closing his eyes, he took a long deep breath. When he opened them again, the carriage was overtaking a figure struggling to carry a portmanteau. Walking a few paces, then stopping and changing hands, the figure turned and stepped aside to allow the carriage to pass.

As he looked out of the window, he realised that the figure with the portmanteau was a young woman. He instantly called to the driver to stop. As he was opening the door to alight from the carriage, his mother became almost hysterical.

"What are you doing, George?" she screamed.

Uncle Edwin and Aunt Lillian had been dozing and awoke puzzled at the sudden cessation of movement.

George stepped out of the carriage and said, "I believe this young lady needs a hand with her luggage. I shall ask her where she is headed." He then started back along the road towards Rosina.

Rosina was standing in the road. She was dressed in her best plum-coloured suit and the pert little hat the vicar's wife had bought for her as a leaving present. The hat was askew on her head. Her hair had broken out from its clips, and the wind was very nearly blowing her away. She stood by the side of the road when she heard the carriage coming along the track. Her arms aching with the weight of her bag, she decided to take a rest before carrying on along the road to Lambecote Grange.

Elsie Buttle was a real tarter. Rosina had decided she would need all her buttons on to cope with this hard-nosed woman. Even though she would have a heavy case to carry, Elsie had snorted with laughter when

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

Rosina asked her if someone could meet her in the village with a pony and trap.

“Well, that’s a good start,” Elsie had quipped. “We are not servants for the likes of you, madam,” she snarled. “You can carry your own case and don’t take too long about it ‘cos I shall expect you to be working and looking smart by five o’clock.

Rosina thought she was being hired to wait in the dining room. The master and mistress didn’t arrive home until Friday and today was only Monday. Still she would soon find out what this bossy woman was really about. Better get going.

As she started on her journey again, she realised that the carriage had stopped twenty yards along the road. The door opened and a tall gentleman alighted. He seemed to be speaking to someone inside the carriage.

Shrugging his shoulders, he began walking back towards her, smiling. “I think that portmanteau is rather too heavy for you to manage, madam. Can I be of assistance?” George asked.

She was trying to answer intelligibly, not having much breath in her lungs after the long haul and being a little afraid of what was happening to her. She stood and looked at the man and desperately tried to get her breath and to work out what this gentleman wanted with her.

George took the portmanteau from her. “Can we take this for you?” he asked. “Where are you bound?”

“Th-thank you,” she stammered. “I am on my way to Lambecote Grange. It seems much farther than when last I came without a heavy bag to carry.”

“Lambecote Grange is my destination also,” George said. He could not stop the excitement he felt, looking at this beautiful woman, struggling with this infernal bag. “Let me put your bag into the carriage, and you can ride the rest of the way with my family and I.”

“I will manage sir. Thank you,” Rosina protested.

George would hear none of it. He put the bag on the back shelf of the carriage and helped her inside next to his mother whose face was a picture. If George had put a bag of horse manure into the carriage his mother could not have pulled a more distasteful face. Turning her head away, she refused to look at this untidy and dishevelled creature.

Aunt Lillian smiled at Rosina, and Uncle Edwin, always delighted to see a pretty face, helped her to find space to sit comfortably.

“Do you have business at Lambecote Grange?” George asked.

“Yes sir!” she replied nervously “I am to take a position there at five o’clock today.”

Charlotte nearly exploded. “What!” she exclaimed. “You are only just arriving for work. What time of day is this to arrive for work?”

“I have travelled from Nottingham ma’am,” Rosina said. “The coach arrives in the village at one o’clock, and I have been walking along this road for over an hour.”

“Piffle!” Charlotte retorted. “You could have organised a pony and trap to bring you the short distance to Lambecote Grange.”

“Please forgive my mother,” George implored. “We have been travelling many days, and she is not feeling well.”

“Oh, I am sorry, ma’am,” Rosina answered. “If you will ask the driver to stop I will walk the rest of my journey.”

“You will do no such thing,” George said angrily. He stared at his mother in disbelief. “What position are you to take up at Lambecote Grange, Miss—? I am sorry but I did not ask your name. I am George Bingham and this is my mother and my aunt and uncle. We have been travelling in Europe and are returning home to Lambecote Grange.”

Rosina was struck dumb. Here she was sitting in a grand carriage with this lovely man and his mother who would probably dismiss her before she could take up any duties at Lambecote Grange. Servants should not have the nerve to ride in the same carriage as gentry.

Lillian leaned over and touched her hand. “What did you say your name was my dear?” she asked.

“R-Rosina Morton, ma’am,” she stuttered. “I am to be the new silver service maid, ma’am.”

Charlotte threw her arms in the air in a dramatic gesture saying, “We are returning to a disruptive household with staff arriving with the family. What will people think?”

“Mother, you forget we are not expected until Friday. It was your idea not stay on in Southampton but to travel straight home. We could not possibly contact Mrs. Buttle to prepare for our arrival. Please calm yourself. Miss Morton has had a long journey as have we, and I am very pleased that you are going to be our silver service helper, Miss Morton. I am sure we will all be very happy together.” George tried to console his mother whilst not offending this lovely young woman.

Elsie Buttle, who was a very obese woman, was sitting with her skirts above her knees and her legs akimbo in front of the iron range in the kitchen of Lambecote Grange. She had become quite accustomed to her afternoons, resting in front of the kitchen range. She pondered what would happen when they returned at the end of the week. She had employed a new cook to arrive on Wednesday, and the dining room maid

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

who should be here anytime now if she knew what was good for her. Elsie didn't like this girl at all and felt she had been hasty in listening to the vicar and his smiling wife with their verbal reference, as they called it. She closed her eyes and nodded off, enjoying the peace and quiet of the warm kitchen.

"Mam. Mam!" Violet came running into the kitchen, screaming at her mother. "Quick. Get up. There is a carriage coming up the drive. I think it's Master's."

"Away we yer," Elsie said, jumping up from her ungainly pose in front of the fire. "They are not home 'til Friday."

Violet ran back to the front window to get a better look. "Well, they are here now so hurry up get yer boots on and get out front quick."

Elsie pushed her feet into her boots, pulled her skirts down, and tried to tidy her hair whilst running around like a headless chicken. Just as she reached the front door, she saw Master George alighting from the carriage, pulling down the steps, and holding out his arm towards a lady in a plum-coloured suit with long unkempt hair flying from underneath a stupid hat.

The woman emerged from the carriage, smiling at Master George. She then went to the back of the carriage to help herself to her portman-teau.

Elsie nearly collapsed on the spot. It was that woman from the vicarage. What was she doing in the carriage with the family? Elsie knew Rosina would be trouble. Well, she would not stay one night under this roof.

Oh no! Bloody hell! What am I going to do—no cook, no beds made-up, and hardly any staff? she thought. Elsie ran outside to help the mistress from the carriage. When she saw the mistress's face she did not feel any easier.

Charlotte was beside herself. She had never in her life had to ride in a carriage with mere servants. George had gone too far this time. She would have to make sure that he was not as lenient with staff as his father had been. It was her job to run the household, and she would make sure this chit of a girl was sent packing as soon as possible. She flounced into the house with Elsie bowing and scraping and protesting how she thought they would be home on Friday.

Today was only Monday, and Elsie had nothing prepared for dinner. She dared not let on that the household was without a cook, a kitchen maid, a boot-boy, or Alfred, the butler, who approaching retirement, had walked out soon after the family left for Europe. She had intended the

master to thank her for saving money and being thrifty, for not taking on the staff until the last minute, but now she was in a right pickle. That vicarage woman—how had she wheedled herself into their carriage? But she would catch it when she got her on her own.

George took Rosina's bag from the carriage dismissing her attempts to take it from him. He strode into the house, and after making exclamations on how wonderful it was to be home and how lovely it looked, he asked Elsie where he needed to put Rosina's bag.

"W-what?" Elsie spluttered to herself. *Needing her bag indeed! She will not be needing any bag when I am finished with her. Huh!*

"Mrs. Buttle, I asked you where Miss Morton would be sleeping," George repeated.

Elsie turned her very large frame around to face George. Her face turned red as she blustered, "Follow me, Miss Morton!" Striding out, she tripped over the boot-laces that she had not had time to tie in the panic of the last ten minutes, and fell on her face.

George and Rosina rushed forward to help Elsie who was close to tears and completely flustered by now. George helped her to her feet, asking her again to tell him which room Rosina would be using. He had no objection to taking the bag himself and leaving Elsie to prepare refreshments for the travellers.

"We have been on the road since dawn, Elsie," George explained. "We are very tired."

Elsie told Violet to go and show the girl where she should sleep, but George insisted on carrying the bag.

Violet took them to the top of the house, a garret room, which she supposed would be the room for the dining room maid.

George was too tall for the door, and dipping his head, he moved into the room. He was aghast at the condition of the place. He had no idea his home had such places within its walls. Water ran down the outside wall which had a tiny window with a pane of glass missing. The bed was a straw-filled mattress on a rickety wooden frame. Propped up with bricks, a broken chest of draws stood in the corner. It was so cold he could not imagine anyone sleeping in here without suffering pneumonia. He stepped out of the room taking the bag with him.

Rosina did not know what to think. She was not staying in a room like that. She thought it might be better to leave now. Elsie was never going to forgive her for arriving in the carriage with the family. The mistress was a bitch of the first order, and Rosina did not want to stay in this godforsaken place.

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

George asked Violet, "Who usually sleeps here, Violet?"

"Agnes used it when she was kitchen maid, sir."

"So that is why poor Agnes sniffed," George said. "That room is not fit for a dog. Where is the new kitchen maid sleeping, Violet?" he hardly dared to ask.

"We don't have one, sir. Not till Wednesday," Violet replied sheepishly.

"Oh." George's brain was working fast now. "Where is the cook's room?"

"We don't have a cook either sir—not till Wednesday."

"Do we have a butler?" George asked, noting the look of fear in Violet's eyes. He answered himself sarcastically, "Not till Wednesday. Don't get upset, Violet. I think I understand. I am sorry we caused you so much grief!"

"Come with me, Miss Morton. I shall try to get this sorted. Come into the morning room and take some refreshments. You must be cold and hungry after such a long journey. I know I am," George, said taking Rosina's arm gently.

"If you don't mind, sir, I would rather take my refreshment in the kitchen. Then I shall be on my way. I really do not think the housekeeper is requiring someone like me. Mrs. Buttle has different ideas on how to keep house than I was led to understand from the vicar. I am sorry, Mr. Bingham, but I could never sleep in a room like that," Rosina said, pushing her shoulders back and straightening her hat. George was shocked and angry to find that people were living under his roof in such dreadful conditions.

"Miss Morton, please do not be hasty," George implored. "I shall find you a suitable room, and we can sort this mess out tomorrow after we have rested and eaten. This is a confusion caused by my family returning earlier than Mrs. Buttle expected. That does not excuse the room you were offered. I know things will change. Now that I am home, I intend to take control. I shall need help to get the household running smoothly again and would like to think I could count on your help." George could not believe he was putting his trust in a woman he had met only minutes before. He had a feeling that this woman was a godsend and would do his best to keep her.

Rosina felt sorry for Mr. Bingham. He had shown her such great kindness, and she agreed to stay at least until morning. Elsie sat at the large wooden table in the kitchen. The whole episode was beyond belief.

The fall she had taken in the hall had knocked the wind out of her sails, and her face was ashen.

Violet had taken over, and with the help of the master, had found Rosina a room on the first floor next to her mother's room.

Rosina helped Violet prepare a meal—vegetable soup, cold meats with cauliflower au gratin, and potatoes roasted in their jackets, followed by fruit compote, made from the delicious preserves cook had bottled in the autumn a year earlier.

Rosina served the meal in the dining room, and Charlotte continued to ignore her, turning her face away every time any part of the meal was offered to her. Rosina insisted on eating her meal in the kitchen with Elsie and Violet.

After dinner, Violet persuaded Elsie to take an early night. She tucked her mother up with a warm drink. And after explaining to Rosina that she lived in a cottage in the village with her family, Fred Buttle drove her home in the pony and trap that was kept for shopping trips to the village. The estate workers used the carriage to travel to church on a Sunday, and it should have been sent to meet Rosina when she arrived in Lambcote earlier that day.

Rosina checked all the doors and windows and proceeded to her room. She knocked quietly on Elsie's door, and getting no reply, went to her own room.

She was exhausted and did not unpack her bag fully, just taking out her night attire and what she needed for the morning. She lay for a long time thinking on the day's events. She could not believe that she had travelled in the master's carriage. Mr. Bingham was very personable and seemed so genuine. He was not like the vicar, professing God's will all the time yet selfish as the next man underneath. Mr. Bingham seemed different. His Aunt and Uncle seemed like real gentry, not just sitting and being waited on hand and foot. The mistress, on the other hand was not as gracious. Rosina thought Mrs. Bingham was a spoilt selfish woman, ignorant of the ways of the world. She only knew what she picked up from other silly preening women of high birth. After all, why should they know anything other than trivia? They would never need to know any skills except perhaps a little stitching and musical knowledge.

Rosina felt angry. Her own mother had to scrub her fingers to the bone to eat the meagre rations that she could buy. The little she earned at the vicarage actually changed life for the Morton family. Rosina knew her father was beyond help. She was grateful that she had been able to procure that position for her mother and sister.

THE CALL OF THE HUNTSMAN

Things could be a lot worse, she thought. She would give this job a try if only to show the arrogant mistress that she was not afraid of her. If the master turned out to be after something else, then he would get the shock of his life if he tried it on with her. She smiled to herself and fell into a deep sleep.

For what seemed like hours, George lay awake, tossing and turning. Perhaps he was too tired to sleep. He would have to take charge of this household starting tomorrow. Elsie had had it her own way far too long. He knew his father left a lot to Elsie and Fred Buttle. George thought that was because he spent too much time entertaining mother's silly friends. He was sure they were only fair-weather friends, pandering to his mother's whims and fancies for the privilege of being included in her afternoon teas.

He decided to ask the new girl to stay on, perhaps offer her a little more money, feeling sure she had the makings of an excellent organiser. Look at the way she had organised the dinner tonight. There was not a hair out of place when she served the delicious meal after Elsie had completely lost her composure. The girl had organised Violet, who after all, was only a lady's maid and not accustomed to cooking a meal for the dining room. The meal had been concocted out whatever she could lay her hands on, and it tasted delicious.

George was ashamed of his mother's behaviour and would tell her so when she had rested after her trip. People could not sleep in conditions like that when two-thirds of the rooms in this house were left empty. He would make sure that staff was employed to provide fires in everyone's room be they family or staff.

Mother and Elsie needed a few lessons in management. A happy household was paramount to the success of any estate. People worked much better when they had had a good night's sleep and plenty of good food. And by God, he would see to it that that was what they got.