



*Weather Birds  
High*

**NEVILLE SHERRIFF**

**A Woman Answers The Call Of Africa**

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means, including scanning, photocopying, or otherwise without prior written permission of the copyright holder. Copyright © 2012 Neville Sherriff

# 1.

## **Osnabrück, Westphalia May 1804**

She lay slumped on her side on the floor, her right arm clinging to the bed for support. Slowly the blanket shifted in her straining fingers, followed her sideways slide till it slipped from the bed. Still she pulled at it as she lay stretched out now, so that it moved up across her body to touch her chin. There, a trail of blood stained its edge.

Her legs curled up towards her swollen stomach, a slow movement which brought a low groan from her broken lips. Her hand touched her abdomen, rested gently upon it as if trying to reassure her unborn child all was well.

From where she lay she heard her husband's heavy footfalls on the other side of the cramped room. There was the sound of the wooden chest creaking when he opened it, the rustle of the shirt as he drew it over his head. Her eyes, wide open despite the pain racking her battered body, focused steadily on the darkness beneath the bed, saw the speck of dust on the ragged carpet near her face. She had missed it while cleaning. As soon as the worst pain ... as soon as he was gone ...

The room, like the rest of the house, was so small it was easily kept clean. She had dusted the entire place just that evening when she returned home from her work as a seamstress. She knew she should no longer be working the long hours she did, but the baby was due any day and they needed the money. Especially now, with Dieter out of work again. Perhaps that was why he beat her, perhaps men felt shamed when they could not provide. Yet even as Hanna Rymer's mind struggled with thoughts to quell the pain, she knew it was not so. Dieter had beaten her before, when she thought there was no reason for it.

'Hanna.'

His voice came from behind. Why had she not heard him move?

'Hanna.' Louder this time, yet with no trace of the anger which had exploded round her just moments ago. His eyes too, when she bit her lip and raised her head to look at him, showed no mad rage, no remorse, no sign of anything untoward. It was as if it were perfectly normal for her lie curled up on the floor, her nose and mouth bloody, her ribs pounding with pain where he had struck her.

'I need money.'

Slowly her gaze travelled up his long legs and wiry frame to his cold, expressionless face. Dieter Rymer was an exceptionally tall man, but from Hanna's prone position he seemed like a giant. There was an ugly gleam in his eye as he waited for her response.

Though she knew she was risking a beating, Hanna was unable to speak. She wanted to plead with him, to explain how desperately low their resources were, how much would soon be needed for the baby. She wanted to ask him what she was doing wrong, why he so often lashed out at her in anger. Was it her and her baby which brought the demons of his mind rushing to the surface?

'Hanna ... I know you've hidden it somewhere.'

Perhaps it was her ugliness, her bloated appearance which irritated him. Was that why there were other women? In a sense she had come to accept it as something affecting most men in similar fashion, had hoped once the baby was there and she regained her normal figure he would be content with her again. She was prepared to wait, why then -

'Jesus, woman! Answer me!'

His enraged shout made her bite her lips so hard a fresh stream of blood trickled across their broken surface. 'Kitchen,' she murmured thickly. 'Behind ... beneath the flour barrel.'

His footsteps thudded on the floor as he left the room. Hanna wished she could call out to him, could plead with him to take only what he needed. There was no more hidden anywhere else. She heard the clatter of utensils as he scattered them onto the kitchen floor. Then there was silence, followed by the creak and slam of the front door when he left the cottage.

It was very quiet then - and safe. Hanna's head slumped slowly back to the floor. She lay there a long time, filled with pain and misery, till slowly the pain receded and only her loneliness remained, welling up ever stronger to fill the void. It was completely dark in the room when she struggled to get upright, but failed. God, how her stomach hurt!

The sound of the front door stopped her trying again. Was it Dieter? Perhaps this time he regretted what he had done, perhaps this time she would get the chance to talk - perhaps he would talk.

'Hanna?' The voice was a woman's, low and concerned. 'Hanna, I saw him leave ...' It was her neighbour, Henrietta Lock.

'The bedroom. I'm in the -' Her voice broke, victim to the rush of tears, not of pain, but of shame that those round her knew. She was pleased of the protective fringe of dark, though she knew that later she would have to clean herself up as best she could. There was no knowing how Dieter would react when he came home and found her the way he had left her.

The light showing through from the kitchen framed the woman's plump shape in the doorway. 'Hanna?'

'Here.'

The footsteps, like Dieter's, were heavy, though without the threatening thump of his measured walk. 'Oh, child - what's he done to you?' Hands reached for Hanna's shoulders, gently turned her round. 'Come ... I'll help you onto the bed.'

'No ... The baby ... I just want to lie a while.'

'He struck you there?'

'I don't know ... my ribs, I think.'

The woman moved upright. 'I'll call Tager.'

'No!'

'You think he doesn't know? We all do, my child. That man of yours ... We all know. Come, Tager can help lift you.' Without waiting for further objections she was gone from the cottage.

The bulky shape of her son, Tager, preceded her when she returned. Despite the dark, Hanna covered her face with her hand. Though she knew Tager reasonably well and was fond of him, she realised he was completely infatuated with her. It had amused her in the past, yet now she was embarrassed by his seeing her this way.

Without a word he shifted his strong arms beneath her. Though Hanna was a tall woman and strongly built, the kind who tend to plumpness as they grow older or refrain from sufficient exercise, Tager lifted her easily. Gently he placed her on the bed, then stepped aside for his mother to come closer.

‘Fetch me a candle and tinder box,’ the woman snapped, ‘then leave us.’

‘I want to help.’

‘You will by leaving us,’ Henrietta Lock said more gently, and Hanna saw her smile up at her son.

For a moment Tager stood still, looking down at their charge, then turned and left the room. He was back moments later, but his mother refused to let him light the candle. When she told him firmly, ‘I’ll do it,’ Hanna knew the woman sensed her embarrassment.

‘I’ll be in the kitchen,’ he said and turned to leave.

‘No, don’t stay in the house,’ Hanna said quickly. ‘If Dieter returns ...’

‘I can take care of Dieter Rymer,’ snarled Tager, confident in his size and strength. Hanna knew he would be no match for her husband’s natural savageness. ‘Please ... it’s best if you’re not here.’

‘Wait at home,’ added his mother.

Once Henrietta had the candle lit, she inspected Hanna’s face in the flickering light. ‘Your eyes are swollen, but like your mouth, they’ll heal with time.’ Her glance moved significantly towards Hanna’s belly. ‘Does it hurt?’

‘My ribs hurt more,’ Hanna replied and managed a smile.

‘Dear God, why does he do this to you? Why do you let him?’

‘I don’t know, at least not why he beats me. But I let him because I love him.’

‘Love? That man? When will you see, child, when will you learn what Dieter Rymer is? He doesn’t understand love!’

‘He’s my husband, he’s ... upset because he lost his work. That, and the baby. I think he’s worried how we’ll care for the baby.’

Henrietta let out a scornful blast of air through her nostrils. ‘All that man cares about is himself, where his next drink is coming from. Drink, and ...’

‘Women,’ Hanna finished for her. ‘I know about them, but it doesn’t matter. I understand - just look at me! Fat and ugly. What man could desire me?’

The older woman smiled sadly, then slowly moved the candle back and forth in front of Hanna’s bruised face. ‘Ugly, you say? You’ve never been that. Not a beauty, but certainly not ugly.’

Hanna returned the smile though it hurt her lips. Her neighbour was not lying, for Hanna considered herself attractive rather than pretty, though she wished her mouth were somewhat smaller and her breasts larger. Her strongest assets were her legs, long and strong limbed. And her hair, of course, a silky mass of golden curls which glistened in the sun. But that had been before her pregnancy, when Dieter made love to her regularly, sometimes three or four times a day. Even then Dieter had seemed aloof, taking her roughly, sometimes cruelly. It made him seem like a stranger, and she wondered now whether it was not that which excited her and kept her infatuated with him. She had always had a strong sex drive, even felt guilty about it at times, and her and Dieter’s brief life together had touched on little else but physical passion. She was wrong, she realised now, to blame it on the baby; there were other women even before she had started to show.

`I know you love him, or think you do,' came Henrietta's low voice, `and I'm sure it hurts when you hear me say things about him. But Hanna -'

`He has a bad side, I know, but Dieter has -'

`Has what? Some redeeming qualities? Listen to me, however much it hurts! I've known Dieter Rymer since he was born. His father was a drunkard and a pimp, he beat the little boy. His mother ... well, she was not much better than a whore prowling the streets. So perhaps Dieter is not entirely to blame for the way he's turned out, though I've known others who've come from worse backgrounds and made the most of their lives. But he can't even stay employed, he's always getting into fights with the other workers. Now he went and beat up a foreman. Who'll hire him now?'

`He's been talking of finding work on the farms.'

`Him? A farm labourer? Not likely!'

The stream of complaints about Dieter continued while the woman tended Hanna's wounds, telling about the troublemaker he had been while growing up.

Hanna hardly heard what was being said; instead she thought about what her marriage to him had become. She was twenty-two when she married Dieter, older than most of her friends when they took husbands. Hanna met him just weeks after moving to Osnabrück where she had been appointed as a seamstress. Attracted to his harsh masculinity, she found herself overwhelmed by his interest in her, though even then she had sensed he was a hard, cruel man. Yet she was powerless to withstand his physical appeal. He had not seemed to care one way or another when she announced she was expecting their child. At least he had not queried whether it was his. It came as a surprise when he agreed to her suggestion that they marry.

Things went reasonably well for the first few months, till she learned what Dieter did on the many nights he left her alone at home. She tried to speak to him about the women then, tried to explain she understood, how she realised a man like him could demand more than she could give. It was the child, she said; things would return to normal once it was born. All she received for her efforts at evaluating their relationship was a slap in the face. Her husband's only other response was that she should stop spying on what he did when away from her.

There had been two more beatings since, because she dared refuse him money from her meagre earnings, money put aside for the birth of their child.

`He hates me,' she said suddenly, interrupting Henrietta's verbal flow. `He hates me and the baby. I know it now.'

The other woman's lips compressed into a tight line. `Then leave him ... I can find a place for you to stay. You'd be welcome with me and Tager, but it's too close to that madman. Leave him - tonight!'

`I can't!'

Tager's mother leaned back with a loud sigh. `Well, then let's get you cleaned up as best we can. But Hanna -'

`I must stay,' came the whispered reply as Hanna gripped the woman's arm. `Perhaps this time ...'

The look in Henrietta's eyes confirmed her view that nothing about Dieter would ever change. Yet she left Hanna in peace as she gently cleaned her wounds and tried to make her more comfortable on the bed.

Long after Henrietta left, Hanna lay in the gloom and watched the candle burn slowly lower. The dwindling flame reminded her of her marriage to Dieter, a relationship which had just about burned itself out. Yet, when had it ever flickered brightly, or with any particular warmth? She realised she was clinging naively to the hope that somehow she was mistaken about the Dieter she had come to know, always believing it was merely circumstance which made him act the way he did. But she knew she was wrong; Dieter was an intensely selfish person whose occasional surface charm was merely a subterfuge to get what pleased him at that moment.

The scream which interrupted her thoughts seemed to come from outside herself, making her jerk on the bed in fright. Then it came again, searing through her throat as the pain clamped viciously inside her. The baby!

It seemed to her she screamed many times, the room filling with sounds of her fear and pain.

'Hanna! Hanna!' This time it was not her voice, and the hands which gripped her were filled with comforting warmth. Through a haze she saw Henrietta's face, saw Tager reaching for her, his thick blond hair tousled from sleep. For a brief moment she felt safe, then the pain struck again, a long, tearing within her. Her cry was a moan this time, deep and drawn out and savage.

Like the candle stub which had reached its end, the brilliant lights behind her tightly closed eyelids dimmed and faded, flickered once, then went out.



## 2.

Dieter Rymer was not drunk, though he had had more than his usual amount of liquor in the tavern that night. It was always that way after exploding into violence: the need for alcohol, yet knowing at the same time it could never hope to fill the emptiness left by spent rage. That was as it should be, he thought now and glanced at the woman lying beside him. He had taken her roughly, the only way he knew how, and now there was the emptiness upon him which always came after sex. That, and violence - they always left a numb emptiness which was slowly filled till a new explosive release was demanded.

If asked, Dieter would have been unable to explain why he had frequently beat Hanna. If he thought about it long enough, he might say it was because he felt she made demands on his life. Her just being there was an intrusion, wasn't it? People were always telling him what to do, expected too much from him. First his father, beating him with belt and fists for what had seemed to Dieter no reason at all. Then his mother, not wanting him round the house when his father was out. He found it strange, as a child, why

his father always hit him when he asked about his mother's many male friends who came to visit, and why he always went out when they were there. And often, when his father finally came home, usually drunk, he would shout at and hit his mother, then clasp the little boy to his chest and cry with him on the steps outside the grimy little house. That was the only part of Dieter's childhood he recalled with any degree of warmth, those few moments when the man would embrace his son, as if shielding him from that which he condoned yet hated at the same time. But the following night a beating could be counted on again.

When his father died, of alcohol and shame, it was said by many, the young Dieter's mother packed her bags and left the village. The boy was left abandoned in the kitchen with its grimy walls which were seldom cleaned. Neighbours discovered him three days later, along with the rats who nibbled at scraps of stale bread, the only food to be found in the house.

There was an orphanage after that, where Dieter was continually involved in scraps with the other boys. The final straw came when he was accused, not unjustly, of raping a retarded girl in the village. Prison followed soon after, an environment which further entrenched Dieter's tendency towards violence and confirmed his conviction that he meant nothing to others. As to how he should regard their feelings and desires, the young man had lacked a role model to foster such an attitude in him.

For a while, when he first met Hanna, he experienced feelings completely foreign to him. At first he merely wanted her physically. He was attracted to her height and strong body, was surprised by her lack of guile so common in the women he usually associated with. Her innocence kept him captivated, as did her passion. Yet when Hanna told him she was expecting his child, he tried in vain to feel paternal pride or even a sense of anticipation to at last have formed a family unit of his own. Even agreeing to marry Hanna had been almost a final attempt to capture some of the elusive emotion.

For barely two months things were acceptable, for he and Hanna carried on much as before. Then the child in her belly began to show, a growing reminder of responsibilities



he did not seek. What demands would be made of him once it was born? Would Hanna be so wrapped up in its care he would count for nothing again? Without even realising it, Dieter again began building the wall of defence which Hanna had in a tiny way breached. It was easier like that, easier to be what he truly was instead of pretending to what he should never be. As his wall grew, so did Hanna's attachment to him become more of a threat.

The woman beside him stirred, saw his fixed glance, then looked away. She understood him, for they were alike in some ways. She knew what it was he wanted from her, knew it did not include much conversation and especially not understanding. She said nothing when he stood up and put on his trousers, just turned on her side and pretended to go to sleep.

He left the room without a word. In a way she was relieved by his moroseness; she had seen the strange gleam in his eyes and it frightened her.

It was cold as Dieter made his way homewards, his fingers playing irritably with what was left of Hanna's money. He felt no remorse at having taken it, only resentment at how much her child would cost. It would be impossible for them to rear the damn thing! What would then be demanded of him? That he work nights as well? Nights, he thought grimly, the sudden realisation he had no day work now brought starkly home to him.

The surge of bitterness seemed to bubble into his throat when he passed the blacksmith's shop where he had managed to remain employed for four months. There, too, they tried to run his life, always expecting that which he could not or would not give. To hell with them - he was better off without them, better off without Hanna and her doting ways and that damn child in her big belly.

Without even thinking, he stooped, picked up a stone, and threw it furiously at the blacksmith's store. So instinctive had been the response he had not even taken aim, yet the stone crashed loudly into a sheet of iron stacked against the wall. Dieter peered quickly round before running into a shadowed side street before someone observed him.

He kept to the winding back streets after that, moving past rows of small merchant shops interspersed here and there by single and double-storied cottages. All were dark.

When he approached the market square with the dark, imposing height of St. Mary's church facing him, he paused to study the open plain for signs of movement. Only a stray cat moved stealthily across its rutted surface. Though he was now some distance from the blacksmith's, anyone seen on street so late at night would automatically arouse suspicion. Gaol would be a foregone conclusion if he were recognised. Dieter had no desire for that or for the floggings which had accompanied his previous sojourns there. After waiting a few moments more, he crossed the square at a run.

It was not long before he reached the street leading to the cottage he and Hanna rented. It was more of a crooked lane, a muddy and torn stretch of earth

winding its way alongside a shallow, stinking canal. The house was in darkness, though a dim glow could be seen through a front window of the Lock's house next door.

There was no front gate, merely a scraggy scrap of land containing Hanna's futile attempts to grow some vegetables. Probably for the fucking baby, thought Dieter and walked heavily across the struggling earth, crushing the feeble plants as though they were Hanna's unborn child beneath his feet.

The fist struck him just as he sensed movement to the side of him. It came as a rush of air that gave him no chance to react before he stumbled backward, landing heavily in the

garden. Mud squelched beneath him when he immediately swung round, ready to defend himself against the boot which normally followed a surprise attack. There was none, only the distant voice which rose above the buzzing in his ears.

`You bastard,' it said.

Dieter did not move. He used the time instead to clear his head and to identify where his assailant stood. He saw him then, focused on the bulky shape of Tager Lock who moved out of the dark and came to stand near his feet.

`You bastard!' came the voice again, hissing with rage.

Dieter felt nothing, not anger at the unprovoked attack nor surprise at why it had taken place. He guessed it had something to do with Hanna for he was aware of their neighbour's fascination with his wife. It never bothered him; he regarded Tager, some years older than himself, as a clumsy blockhead with no chance of ever gaining Hanna's affections. Yet he had not suspected the usually placid man of aggressive reaction.

`Get up,' Tager was saying, standing with feet spread wide apart. `Get up and fight with a man this time.' His fists were in the air, poised some inches away from his chest.

Dieter smiled in the dark, both in amusement at what he now knew was Tager's outrage at his beating Hanna, and at the man's obvious lack of fighting skills. With a movement so swift it would have surprised Tager even in broad daylight, he kicked out harshly, catching the big man on the ankle. As Tager fell with a yelp of pain, Dieter rolled aside and was on his feet in an instant.

He hit Tager three times while the man was down: in the face, the throat, and his stomach. They were hard, chopping blows, delivered with practised speed. Then Dieter was surprised to find himself suddenly clamped inside Tager's arms, pulled down and crushed on top of him with awesome strength. His arms were trapped, his flailing hands unable to do their customary damage. Even so, he managed to knee the bigger man in the groin, but it was as if Tager felt no pain or was too enraged to acknowledge it.

Inexperienced though he was, Tager's great strength was slowly crushing the life out of Dieter. The big man was grunting and groaning like a wounded bull, and his thrashing head kept slamming into Dieter's face. He felt warm blood squirt from his nose.

Again he brought up his knee, felt it crash into Tager's unprotected groin. This time there was a grunt of pain. Dieter managed to squirm to his knees though his torso was still pinioned to Tager's chest. There was enough space now to inflict damage, and he did so with a savage intensity. There was a relaxing of the grip round him and Dieter slipped free.

He crawled away across the muddy ground, turned now into a squelching mess by their wrestling. Great gulps of air slammed into his lungs, so cold and rapid it was quite painful. Though too weak to stand, he glanced behind him, ready to kick out if Tager was crawling after him, but the big man lay squirming on the ground.

Before him Dieter saw one of the few remaining fence stakes which separated their house from their neighbour. He jerked it hard, then fell back when the wet ground released it easily. Rolling onto his buttocks, he pushed himself upright and went to stand above his adversary.

Tager was still rolling round in agony, so that Dieter's first wild swing of the stake missed his head and crashed across his shoulder. The tip of the rotten stake snapped off and went spinning into the night. Dieter cursed and swung again, but Tager flung out his arm.

The wood struck his wrist and this time it was the snap of bone which sounded. Yet there was no response from Tager, no cry of pain.

`Leave him!'

Dieter stopped, the stake held high across his shoulder for the next blow. Tager's mother came hurtling across the small space separating their houses. Henrietta was big like her son, and when she jerked Dieter's arm he almost lost his balance. For the first time since the fight began, he felt rage tighten his chest. Dropping the stake, he struck the woman a sharp backhand blow. She fell back, landed heavily on the soil.

`Don't touch me, you old hag!' He moved menacingly closer, saw fear widen her eyes, and laughed. `What is it with you and your oafish son? Has my precious wife come crying to you again? Well, you two had better -'

`Your wife almost died!' the old woman spat out, wiping blood from her lips. `She lost her baby while you were out fornicating with whores!'

Before Dieter could respond or even comprehend what had been said, he was knocked sideways by a second attack from the resolute Tager. The big man struck blindly at him, using one fist and the elbow of his injured arm to pummel him.

The blows were too wild to have any real effect, and Dieter was able to wriggle free quite easily. Tager was still on his hands and knees, and this time Dieter made sure his punches kept the big man on the ground. When he was sure Tager would not rise for some time, he scrambled to his feet, ignoring Henrietta's screams.

He staggered through the door of the house and made for the bedroom. Hanna was not there. He tore open the curtains and peered at the Lock's home. Had they taken her there, or to a doctor? There were people in the street now, drawn there by Henrietta's wild screaming. Many held lamps in their hands.

He ran to the kitchen, lit a lamp, and began flinging aside pots and pans and jars - anything which could serve as a hiding place for Hanna's money. He found nothing. His ribs hurt from the fierceness of Tager's grip, and then he noticed he could not close his fist properly. Had the last blows broken it? The skin was shattered, blood dripped to the clean kitchen floor.

Ignoring the pain he turned round, wondering where else Hanna might have hidden money. He had to have money - however much he could lay his hands on - for there was no longer any question of his remaining there. Apart from the threat of being arrested, Dieter wanted to get away from what remained of his brief new lifestyle. Away from Hanna, away from the semblance of what others regarded as a normal life.

Before he could move back to the bedroom to search it, the half-open kitchen door burst sideways on its hinges and slammed against the flimsy wall. Tager stood in the dim, flickering light, his face terrible and bloody, his left arm clutched to his chest. In his right hand he held the wooden stake Dieter had used to strike him.

He swayed, slumped against the door, but there was a triumphant gleam in his eye. `That's right, Rymer,' he breathed heavily, `I'm on my feet again.'

`Argh! Get away, you big oaf!'

Tager shook his head, spraying droplets of blood from his cut eye on the door. `No ... We will finish this, you and I.'

For a brief moment Dieter glared at him, then he charged. Bellowing loudly, he went for Tager with head bent low, watching for the swing of the stake. Instead it came as a

thrust, finding its way through his outstretched arms to bury itself against his chest. He lurched backward, trying to catch his breath and

curb the sharp pain which seemed to paralyse him. Tager struck again, swinging the stake in a wild arc this time. The ragged tip caught Dieter at the point of his chin. It tore open the flesh in a long thin line from the point of impact to the side of his eye. When Dieter swung away and dropped to his knees with a cry of pain, Tager threw the stake aside, reached out and grabbed a handful of his hair.

Leading the dazed and bleeding man like a dog on a leash, he dragged him through the door and onto the muddy ground. Dieter heard someone laugh, vaguely saw the dim outlines of those gathered there. The flickering lights of their lamps cast eerie shadows on the wet ground. 'Give it to the swine, Tager!' someone called.

Dieter was given no chance to recover his breath or his balance. He was jerked rapidly forward, his hands scrabbling at the ground like a monkey's till at least he fell face down in the mud. He felt the cold moisture cling to the ugly wound at the side of his face. Mercifully, the hold on his hair was gone.

He was lifted then, hauled up by the scruff of his neck. 'This is for your baby,' he heard Tager say before pain shot through his entire body as Tager crashed his knee into his ribs. Dieter fell onto his side, rolled through the muck, and was back on his hands and knees. There was a loud hoot of jeering

laughter when Tager kicked him squarely on the buttocks, saying, 'And that's for Hanna, who should have booted you out the day she married you!'

The kick sent Dieter stumbling. He landed with his face in the mud again. Other hands grabbed him this time, those of neighbours who now finally had the courage to do what they had often longed to. Pushing and pulling and jeering, they dragged him through the mud and threw him into the road. Someone kicked him.

Dieter scrambled away, shuffling down the dark road in a crab-like crawl. Two small boys ran beside him, throwing stones. 'Bully!' they cried. A dog chased after them, snapped at his heels.

At last he staggered upright and glanced back towards the place of his shameful departure. Men and women stood there laughing, one or two of them glancing in his direction, others slapping Tager's back.

The two little boys had stopped some distance away, fearfully watching him with stones in their hands. One threw his load half-heartedly in his direction, then turned and ran back to the crowd. The second remained in place, stuck his tongue out at Dieter, then turned round, bent over, and farted robustly. Only then did he run away, laughing wildly.

Dieter watched the urchin make his getaway, his pain forgotten for the moment. All he experienced right

then was a deep and bitter loathing for all mankind. He had been right; he was nothing to them. Even what they had done to him that night was not because of him, but because of Hanna. She was one of them, one of the rest. How he hated her! How he hated them all!

He turned and shuffled on, heading for the dim lights which glowed in the market square, thinking only of a world in which he alone made the rules.

KE  
KE  
KE

### 3.

From her bed, Hanna could hear Tager moving in the kitchen. When she smiled, the grimace pulled at the skin of her broken lips, a harsh reminder of the events of the past few days. She realised, too, it was her first smile since the night Dieter had beat her and caused her to lose her baby.

After spending two nights in the Lock's home, she insisted she move back into her house when it became evident Dieter had left the village. Tager's mother had reluctantly agreed, though she spent most of the days at Hanna's bedside, talking and cooking and cleaning the little house.

Hanna appreciated the old woman's company, knew that Henrietta was concerned about her mental state. Yet it felt to her as if the baby had never existed. She wondered whether her anxiety at Dieter's lack of concern for their unborn child had affected her in some way, that subconsciously she had feared its birth. Had Dieter's hold on her made her so wicked a person she valued his affections above the life of her child?

Now she had neither, she thought without rancour. She was numb, without even self-pity, a battered human shell with the mere semblance of a soul living within. Her parents were long dead, and of what had become of her three sisters she had no idea; they had never been close.

Tager came into the room just then, carefully carrying a bowl of steaming soup. He came round every night after finishing his long day at the carpentry shop where he worked, usually talking for a while before feeding her the meal prepared by his mother.

He smiled and placed the bowl beside the bed. 'It's very hot,' he warned her. He stood beside her, his concern and obvious love for her making him appear quite sheepish.

Hanna patted the blankets. 'Sit, Tager.'

He stared at her, then at the chair where he normally assumed his vigil while she ate, then glanced nervously at the bed. Hanna patted it again. After a few moments of hesitation he sat down, looking stiff and awkward. His eye and cheek were badly swollen from Dieter's blows and his left hand was tightly bandaged. A leather sling hung loosely round his neck. Hanna supposed he used it during the day to support his broken wrist.

Even that, she thought, failed to make her feel anything. She supposed she should feel guilty about his injuries, for she was sure they made it impossible for him to perform his carpentry chores. Yet it was as if she were careless of who and what her broken life with Dieter had touched; she had not asked Tager to become involved in what happened, had not asked him to love her. Still, she should feel something for this gentle man who had acted on her behalf and now suffered the consequences.

She reached out, touched the bandage, and said, 'Are you able to work at all? I'd hate to think your employers hold this against you.'

He smiled, a warm, gentle gesture which had always endeared him to her. 'I manage all right, though it'll be a while before I can get back to any intricate work. It's not a bad break.'

He pointed to the bowl of soup. 'Eat before it gets cold,' he said. 'As for my work ... I've been with them since I was fifteen, so they know I'm no troublemaker. My father worked there too. They've been understanding about it.'

His last words made Hanna wonder what there was to understand - had Tager's actions made others regard the two of them as being more than friends? She wondered what he had said to explain his defence of her honour, yet knew Tager well enough to doubt whether he would imply there was anything between them. Surely it was not so strange for a caring neighbour to have acted the way he did? She recalled his mother proudly telling her how Tager's esteem had risen in the community, for there were few men with the courage to confront Dieter the way he had.

'I haven't thanked you for what you did. Dieter probably deserved the hiding you gave him, but you shouldn't have interfered.'

Tager blushed and looked away. 'Not much of a hiding, I'd say. At one stage I thought he would kill me.'

'Dieter's a dangerous man,' she said softly.

'And I shouldn't have interfered, as you said. But Hanna ... I'd had enough of how he treated you. This last beating, seeing your face all broken ... I couldn't stop myself. I wanted to hurt him, I ...

Hanna,' he said, looking her directly in the eyes, 'I wanted him out of your life. I'm glad he's gone.'

She touched his hand again, gently stroked the skin showing through the wad of bandages. 'Tager, I'm not the woman for you. I know how you feel - I've seen how you look at me, and it hurts almost more than anything else right now.'

'I can't help myself, Hanna, even though I know you feel nothing for me.'

'That's not true ... You're very dear to me.'

'But you don't love me.'

'I loved Dieter, how -?'

'And now?' he interrupted, 'After what he did to you, now he's abandoned you? Do you still love him?'

She was silent for a long time. 'I don't know what I feel. It's as though there's nothing, no pain at the loss of my child, no emotion at Dieter's leaving. And ... Has he really left? One never knows with him.'

'You'd take him back if he returned?'

'I don't know.' It was a whisper.

Tager stood up from the bed, his shoulders slumped. 'Your soup,' he reminded her.

'You'll stay awhile? I don't want to be alone just yet.'

He smiled and nodded, but did not resume his seat. Only when Hanna finished the soup and he had removed the bowl to the kitchen, did he speak again. 'What'll you do if he doesn't return? It'll be some time before you can work again.'

Hanna bit her lip, knowing what he meant. Dieter had taken all her money, so there was no way she could continue to pay the rent. Would she be thrown out, or would the landlords be sympathetic and grant her time to get back on her feet? Knowing them, she doubted it.

Tager said, 'You know you'll always have a place with us. I could sleep in the front of the house.'

'You've both done so much already ... Food, comfort ...'

`Because we love you, Hanna,' he said and smiled without blushing, as if now he could speak openly, proudly, about his feelings for her.

`I love both of you too.'

`Not in the way you loved Dieter,' he said unnecessarily, and this time there was a sad twinge to his smile.

`I don't know how I loved Dieter - if at all.' When she saw the hope flash into his eyes she quickly added, `But I was his woman, still am, I suppose. It'll take time, Tager, lots of time before I know for sure where I stand with him.'

`You'll have time, Hanna - and love. As much as you need, for as long as you need it.' There was a twinkle in his eye when he turned to leave. `You won't want to consider it now, but whether Dieter Rymer returns for you or not, I know we'll be married some day. Time works in more ways than one, that I know!'

When she heard him lock the kitchen door behind him as he left, Hanna felt strangely comforted.





## 4.

Since leaving Osnabrück, Dieter had managed to find work among a group of labourers hired for a few days in Münster, the capital of Westphalia. Though the wages were low, the situation suited him, for he was not sure whether the Osnabrück authorities might try to track him down. He anyhow doubted whether he would have been employed for longer; the foreman who hired him had studied his bruised and cut face with distaste. He needed men in a hurry though, and despite Dieter's injuries it was easy to tell he was strong.

Dieter became even more satisfied with his situation during his final hours at work. It happened while he was carrying kegs into a general dealer's store and saw a clerk enter an alcove at the back of the serving area. From where he stood, Dieter could see him as he opened a small safe. When the clerk was finished, he closed but did not lock it.

Once Dieter was back outside, he moved into the alley alongside the building. There was no door or window where he judged the alcove to be. The rest of the labourers were unloading a wagon filled with crates, so he strolled closer as if to help. The foreman spotted him and jerked a thumb in the direction of the store.

'You!' he snarled, 'Get done with those barrels.'

Instead of turning straight back, Dieter nodded but walked round the side of the wagon. From there he could see beyond the turn in the alley, to where a door was situated at the back of the store. It stood ajar.

'Get moving!' the foreman yelled.

Dieter pretended to glance sourly at him, but his gaze took in the contents of the wagon. There were just three more crates to be unloaded; the men would be done soon. Would the wagon then be moved out the alley, the place left deserted?

He carried two more kegs into the store, each time glancing towards the alcove, then checking the situation at the wagon when he returned outside. The men were busy with the last crate now, grunting under its weight as they struggled with it towards the store. As they reached the steps one of them lost his grip. The men cursed loudly when the crate shifted dangerously.

'Watch it, you fools!' the foreman shouted and came running closer to lend a hand.

Dieter saw his chance in that instant. Ducking low behind the remaining barrels before the foreman spotted him and ordered him to help, he waited till the sweating, cursing men had readied their crate and started the last few yards to the store. The foreman still held one corner, his back to Dieter, shouting out instructions as the labourers struggled slowly forward with their load.

When the foreman and the first two labours were inside the building, Dieter moved. He sprinted out from behind the barrels and ducked low in case someone watching the struggling men from inside the building should see him. Reaching the alley entrance, he flattened himself against the wall, glanced quickly round to see whether anyone from across the street had observed him, then walked as normally as possible down the alley.

It felt as if eyes watched him from all angles, but he forced himself to stick to a measured pace, head bent slightly forward so that the brim of his hat concealed his face. The walk

to the door he had spotted earlier seemed endless. Would it still be open, and if not, how would he explain being in the alley if seen there? A call of nature, he thought - that was what he would say, even though it might mean a scolding. The men were surely finished with the crate by now, were perhaps already heading back to the wagon.

At last the door was before him. At first it seemed closed, but then it moved in the breeze, swinging open on creaking hinges. Dieter hesitated, then stepped inside when it swung open again.

As he had thought when he first saw the door, it was right at the back of the store, providing an entrance to a large room with shelves piled high with assorted merchandise. A storeroom of sorts, he decided, smaller than the one in which he had been stacking kegs. He inched forward, keeping close to the shelves.

Satisfaction tinged with relief surged through him when he found he could see right to the front of the store where the foreman and the labourers still struggled with the crate. It seemed to have jammed in the doorway, providing a focal point of interest for the merchant's clerks as well as the few customers inside the store.

Moving to his hands and knees, Dieter crept out the small storeroom and into the shop. He stayed close to the wall, moving in behind the waist-high counter which ran the length of the serving area. The alcove was suddenly before him, the edge of the safe visible when he peered round the corner. Then he was inside, forcing himself even closer to the floor. If someone came now there would be no escape, no window to jump through, no way to flee but back inside the store.

A loud crash followed by cries from the spectators stilled his nerves; the crate was playing its part in helping him again. He rushed for the safe, saw it had not even been shut properly, and jerked it open. It squeaked, but the noise was drowned by the rumpus at the front entrance.

Hands shaking, Dieter reached inside. When he had seen the clerk place something inside, he immediately assumed it was money, but now all he could see was an array of documents. He pushed them aside, scrabbled desperately among the narrow shelves. A cloth bag tumbled out and fell to the floor with a heavy clunk. Suppressing a cry of triumph, Dieter snatched it up. It contained only keys - dozens of them on a thick, wire ring.

Cursing softly, he threw everything back inside the safe, desperate now to get out of there before he was discovered. He had just turned, was still on hands and knees, when a clerk, the same one he had seen earlier, stepped into the alcove. The man was looking back as he walked, watching events at the entrance. He stumbled across Dieter's crouched form before he could react.

The clerk fell hard, uttering a dull cry as he banged his forehead against the side of the safe. Dieter started to rise, ready to flee before the stunned clerk could shout for help, but the dazed state of the man made him hesitate. Surely he would know where the money was?

Spinning round, Dieter crashed his weight onto the clerk, pinning the much smaller man to the ground while he clamped a hand over his mouth. The clerk's spectacles had smashed when he hit the safe and now lay at an odd angle across the bridge of his nose. Though stunned, his eyes widened with fear.

Dieter reached for the bunch of keys lying on the floor, gripped the wire rung looped through them and slammed the clinking metal down across the clerk's throat. `Keep your

mouth shut,' he hissed, 'else I'll push this lot through your gullet. The money! Where is it?'

The terrified man was gurgling and thrashing his arms ineffectually. Dieter slapped his face. 'The money, damn you!'

He slacked off the pressure on the man's throat, let him draw in a ragged gasp, then slammed the keys down again. The clerk tried to speak, but emitted only a dry, rasping sound. His hand though, was jabbing desperately in the air, a finger pointing in the general direction of the alcove entrance. Dieter jerked his head round, saw only the broad serving counter outside, glimpsed movement which still seemed centred at the front of the store.

Easing the pressure again, he grabbed a handful of the clerk's hair and jerked his head upright. 'Where?' he demanded.

'Drawer ... there ... counter.'

Dieter saw it then, a set of wide drawers built into a section of the counter. 'These keys?' he asked, pushing the bunch almost into the clerk's eyes. The man nodded rapidly.

Dieter struck him with the fist against the side of the head, a sharp blow which crushed what remained of the clerk's spectacles and sent them flying from his face. The little man gave what sounded like a low cough before slumping back when Dieter released his hold on his hair.

Satisfied the clerk was unconscious, he crawled out the alcove towards the drawers. There were four of them - and so many keys! Yet it would have been dangerous to have dragged the clerk closer and let him open them. He jammed in the first key his sweating fingers gripped. It entered the keyhole but refused to turn. When he tried to jerk it out the key stuck, but to his surprise the drawer moved. It had not been locked in the first place! The damn clerk had lied, had hoped it would slow him down and help expose him.

There was money there, not as much as Dieter had hoped for, but even his quick glance told him it was more than he earned in months. Stuffing it inside his jacket pocket, he jerked at the second drawer. It was locked, as were the other two. From mere yards away came a loud cheer, and he knew his time was up; the jammed crate had done its bit, but now the foreman and his men were in control. He threw the keys into the top drawer, pushed it shut, then crawled back the way he had come.

As he entered the rear storeroom he tensed in expectation of a shout, but none came. He knew it would be mere seconds before the clerk recovered or was found by someone. Once he was behind the shelter of the racks he began running, then burst through the rear door into the fading light outside. The wagon was still there, and from round the corner he could hear the relieved laughter of the labourers as they left the store.

Turning left, he ran in the opposite direction, not knowing where the alley led or whether it had another exit. He was sure it did, for the wagon had faced the opposite direction.

The exit was there moments later, letting him out onto a broad street thronged with people. He slowed to a brisk walk, trying to mingle with the flowing crowd. After a few hundred yards he turned again, into a quieter street this time. He began running, unsure as to which part of the city he was in.

When he entered a busier section and spotted a series of arcades, he knew he was in the main street. He saw Münster cathedral then, headed towards its imposing bulk, as if its sheer size would shield him from eyes that searched for him.

Halting in its southern façade, Dieter paused to catch his breath and to decide his next course of action. Even before the spontaneous robbery, he had planned to move on once

he had been paid, for when leaving Osnabrück he had decided on Rotterdam as his destination. There were plenty of towns and villages along the way, places where he could find work of some kind or another to enable him to build his resources. The only thing which had changed, he thought as he prepared to move on again, was that now he would have to keep moving all night instead of resting along the way. At least he was no longer dependant on finding work along the way.

In a way that suited him too, for he was anxious to reach Rotterdam. Dieter had worked on the docks there some years ago and like most Westphalians was more at home with the Dutch language and customs than with those of Germany.

When he reached the edge of the city, he waited till it was completely dark before he moved into the fields and waterways of Münsterland.

It was still a long way to Rotterdam, his immediate destination but not his journey's end.



## 5.

The men's rough laughter filled the air as they readied themselves to end their working day, packing away their tools, washing their hands and collecting their personal things.

Whereas Tager normally just smiled at their jokes without participating in their boisterous excitement, he now joined in, matching their comments with his own. For the past three weeks, the end of each day filled him with a boyish elation which had been lacking before, for it meant he would soon see Hanna, be with her, talk to her, watch her openly while she recuperated and assumed a semblance of normal activity round the house. Tonight the prospect was made even more exciting because it was a Saturday; he would have the whole of the next day with her.

His fellow carpenters, surprised by the usually reserved Tager's mood, tried to persuade him to join them at the nearest tavern. He declined their invitation with a secret smile.

'Chores to do at home, Tager?' they mocked him, for his blossoming relationship with Hanna was common knowledge. They laughed as they moved off in a happy group. Tager wondered what else they were saying about Hanna and him.

Though he knew it was wrong, he had done nothing to dispel the rumours, for he was egoistic enough to enjoy being associated with Hanna. He did not confirm the gossip though, nor did he say anything which might embellish what was presumed about them.

There was a biting cold as he made his way homewards, yet he found it added to his excitement. He walked fast, in long strides, using the cold as an excuse to hurry.

Tager had recently turned twenty-eight, and felt it was time to settle down. With Hanna, of course, for no one else would do. It amused him how childlike his infatuation with her had been from the start, from the very first day when she and Dieter Rymer moved in next door. He had not found her especially attractive;

Tager was drawn to pretty, petite women. Yet, in Hanna's case he sensed she and Dieter were hopelessly mismatched. It had been that, the impression of her helplessness against the hold which Dieter had on her, which caused the attraction. For some strange reason he felt responsible for her, yet powerless to act out his self-imposed role. Till the night three weeks ago, when he could finally take no more of Dieter's treatment of her.

He arrived home to find his mother in bed. 'Just a cold,' she said and smiled bravely. Tager could tell there was more to it than that; for some months now she had been poorly, and it surprised him how energetic she was when it came to helping Hanna. Tager thought that like himself, so was his mother in a different way infatuated with their neighbour, and the recent crisis had directed her attention away from her own problems.

'I'll make you some broth,' he said now, concerned for her yet at the same time unable to quell his disappointment; he would not be able to visit with Hanna now. He had taken care of his mother since his father's death, but Henrietta was an easy burden with which to live; he could not now abandon her just because she for once needed him more than at other times.

He realised she had seen the disappointment in his eyes, for she gripped his arm and said, 'Cheer up ... She's already fed me and is now busy preparing a meal for you.'

'Hanna?'

His mother smiled indulgently. `Who else?'

`A reversal of roles, it seems,' he said and chuckled.

`She's made good progress - one of these days she'll be back at work, building a new life.'

Tager nodded, smiled thinly, then started for the door. He turned, stared at her for a while, then said, `I want to be a part of her new life. I want to marry her.'

The old woman nodded knowingly. `Give her more time, my son. She needs time.'

`I know, I told her I'd wait.' He sighed, a deep sound of longing. `Perhaps once she knows about Dieter ...'

`Not in the way you think,' his mother said, her words bringing fresh hope welling inside him, for he knew she and Hanna had done much talking. `Hanna accepts there can never again be anything between them. You, in turn, must accept she can't be expected to forget what there was. The ghost of Dieter Rymer can only be laid to rest once she knows what's become of him, that there's no chance he'll return. Till then ... well, she's still his wife, Tager.'

Not his woman, he thought, glancing away so that his mother could not see the triumph in his eyes. `I'm going to wash,' he muttered and left the room.

When he looked in on her a half hour later, he was freshly scrubbed and wearing a clean set of clothes. `I'll be back after I've eaten,' he told her, but Henrietta shook her head and said, `I'm going to sleep now. Enjoy yourself.'

Tager leaned over and lightly kissed her brow. When he rose, she held onto his hand and said, `Time, Tager ... remember that.'

He smiled, kissed her again, and left the house.

\*\*\*\*

Hanna was busy in the kitchen when Tager arrived. She heard him scrape his shoes on the mat outside the door, his soft knock before he entered. He stood in the doorway, his lazy smile unable to conceal his excitement at seeing her again.

Hanna, too, was glad to see him, for over the weeks Tager came to present a kind of normality she desperately needed. He was a man coming home to her in the evenings - even though he was not her man - someone who made her feel wanted and safe. She was not sure how, if at all, her feelings towards her neighbour had changed, but it was enough to anticipate and to enjoy his presence. Like Tager, she was pleased they would have the whole of the next day together.

Though her facial bruises were mostly healed, her body was still sore, else she would have been excited at the prospect of their going out to visit a park or just to stroll along a country lane - with a picnic basket perhaps. Still, it would be nice just having his company at home for a full day.

There was a further reason Hanna was pleased to have Tager to herself, and it surprised her to find she felt no guilt about it. That afternoon she had received the message she had been expecting from her landlords: unless she paid her rent by Monday she would have to leave the house. Dieter had left her nothing, no means of finding alternate accommodation. Besides, she had no desire to live in some cramped hovel on her own with nothing but the remains of her shattered life round her. It would suit her to live with the Locks for a while, to be in a familiar environment. She could sell the few scraps of

furniture she and Dieter had accumulated - he had renounced any rights to their proceeds as far as Hanna was concerned - and at least pay Tager and his mother rent. A day with Tager would present an opportunity for her to broach the subject in the right way.

Though she remembered well his offer that she come live with them if things went wrong, Hanna wanted to formalise the arrangement in some way. Her life since Dieter had abandoned her was still a new, brief experience, but it was new, and did not allow for self-pity or the continued charity of others. While living with the Locks was desirable for her and would delight Tager, she did not want him to perceive it as a signal she was ready for him. Whatever Tager meant to her, Hanna was determined not to hurt him.

She was surprised therefore, to find her carefully planned strategy come to nought when later that night, after they had eaten and Tager was helping her wash the dishes, she found herself limp and willing when he placed his arms about her. It was the first time he had touched her in an intimate way. The gentle strength she felt in his encircling arms was so warm, so secure and different from Dieter's touch, that she leaned back against him.

Neither of them said anything, just stood there locked together, Hanna's back against his chest, her hands still clamped round a wet and soapy plate. At last she put it down, rubbed her hands briefly on her apron, then turned towards him.

He was suddenly shy, more like the Tager she had known before Dieter left her. 'I'm sorry,' he whispered, 'I know I promised ... but I just wanted to hold you, Hanna. I won't -'

'It's fine, it's fine,' she said quickly, placing a finger on his lips. Her heart beat rapidly, her mind

struggling with the confusion caused by her response. Till a few weeks ago she could think of no man but Dieter - Dieter who made her body shake with just a touch, no matter how rough or how distant from her he seemed while doing it. Now, here she stood within the arms of someone she regarded as a friend, so very different a man, and again her body was responding. Even as she moved more tightly against him, Hanna knew that what she felt was unlike her reaction to Dieter; the crescendo of desire was slower, less wild than that she had known. But the desire was there nonetheless, a warm craving to be engulfed by the gentleness Tager offered.

'Come' she said softly and gripped his hand. She knew she was making a mistake, that she was betraying her earlier logic and possibly misleading Tager. Was it her body which wanted him, or merely her mind which sought a temporary sanctuary? Whichever, it commanded her legs to move, to lead him by the hand down the dark passage to her bedroom.

He protested once, haltingly, saying it was not what he expected, that it was too soon for them both. Hanna hushed him with a finger on his lips, though she knew he was right: it was too soon. Yet she drew him on, removing her apron with her free hand before tugging at the buttons at the back of her dress.

Now she was thankful she had extinguished the candle before he came, for she doubted whether she would have the courage to continue if there had been light. And she wanted to go on, wanted to take this feeling of new life which flooded through her and let it wash across whatever wounds remained.

When they caressed each other and she felt his male hardness, hugely swollen, she briefly wondered whether she was physically well enough to receive him. Yet she felt moist and ready, felt open to him, and knew he would be slow.

Making love with Tager was like knowing the man himself, warm and gentle, the pleasure blending with a sensation of intense security. For a while, a brief moment, she thought of Dieter and how they had been. Because he was always rough and fast with her, Hanna had climaxed quickly, often in quick succession. With Tager her orgasm built slowly, subsided again when he, alarmed at her low moan, stopped moving within her.

'It's all right,' she whispered, pulling at his buttocks. Even then he lay still, but now the mere feel of him inside her, filling and stretching her, became an exquisite sensation, so that she thrust her hips upwards for deeper penetration. Again, in that instant before she climaxed, Hanna was acutely aware of the man above her, how different he was to her

husband. He was so big, so heavy despite his attempts to keep his weight off her. She felt crushed by his mere size, as if she were pinned to her bed by the root between her legs and his broad chest rubbing across her sweaty breasts. She felt his coarse chest hair scrape the sensitive tips of her swollen nipples, almost hurting them as he moved again, thrusting deeply when he came. He made no sound, only shuddered and shuddered as she felt him pour hotly into her.

'I love you, Hanna,' he whispered afterwards, his chest heaving as he pushed his face against her neck. Though Hanna did not answer him, she gripped him tightly with her arms and legs, holding him inside her to feel his final spasms, as if his body were not yet done with her.

They lay in the dark, neither of them speaking, even when they slowly untangled their limbs and Tager moved onto his back beside her.

At last he said, 'Why do I feel so sad? It ... you were so wonderful, yet now I feel ... I don't know, just sad.'

'Guilty? Because I'm another man's wife?'

'No, not that - Dieter could never make me feel guilt. No, perhaps it's because ... Hanna, was it me you made love to, me you wanted? Not him?'

'Oh Tager.' She laid her forearm across her eyes, as if not seeing him would shield her from the hurt his words caused. Even so, she grappled with her doubts. Was it Tager she wanted, or merely what being with him offered her? Dieter did not enter the picture, she knew that for sure; since his departure Hanna had felt no physical longing for him. If Tager needed reassurance on that score, it would be easy to give and be completely truthful besides. As to the other, she doubted whether even she would find the answer to her own questions.

'I felt no desire for Dieter,' she told him, 'not earlier tonight, not now. Please believe me, Tager.'

She saw him smile, knew him well enough by now to sense he was struggling to drive the demons from his mind, for Tager never allowed himself to remain disturbed by unpleasant emotions for long.

'Sorry - I suppose I'm insecure with women, that's all. And you're no ordinary woman to me, Hanna.'

Raising herself up, she turned on her side and faced him, her breasts touching his chest. 'Tell me about your women,' she said, plucking at his chest hair. 'Have you had many?'

'Hanna! I don't want to -'



`Come on,' she said playfully, eager to steer her thoughts from more serious, emotional matters, `I know there've been plenty of girls.'

`Girls, yes, but no women till you. Hanna, I'd rather talk about us.'

She gently stroked a finger across his brow, smoothed back his hair and said, `Please, Tager, not tonight. We'll have the whole of tomorrow to talk ... about us, about other things. But not tonight.'

He stared at her in the dark, then she saw him nod. Hanna wondered what the next day would bring, whether she could still think about moving in with the Locks. That alone would cause tongues to wag, and it would be unfair to Henrietta if it became obvious to all that she and Tager were lovers.

When he reached for her, pulling her closer, she pushed her problems from her mind. They, along with so much else, could wait till tomorrow.

