

Scattered Stones

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Chapter 1

Unwashed Memories

The air was filled with sandflies and the sound of the mighty, rushing river. Pat slapped at a sandfly on the back of his neck, splattering blood. Heads bent close together, Pat and his father, Jim, worked the cradle, their hungry eyes searching for gold. Sleeves rolled up, hats low on their ears, wearing thigh-high boots, the pair sifted the river with pick, pan and shovel.

Pat's eyes gleamed; a nugget the size of a small pea lay on the matting in the bottom of the cradle among specks that glittered like stars. They had won a tremendous haul since pegging out *The Redemption*. Yet, up until now, the majority of the winnings had been spent on rebuilding the Welcome Home, which was destroyed by fire when Charles Butler had attempted to kill Ma. Now the building work was finished, and the hotel up and running again, perhaps there would be money left over, money that could be used for the finer things in life. For Pat, the finer things were wine, women and song. Ah, the memories, Pat thought wistfully. Aye, he missed chasing a bit of skirt, the opium dens, and drinking till he dropped. And damn it, he missed Tiny.

Jim clapped his hand on Pat's muscular shoulder. He grinned. "We'll be as rich as kings, son."

Pat wished Tiny were there to share in their good fortune. Smiling sadly to himself, he remembered the last time he and Tiny drank together. It was the night before the Big Flood. The night they thought they'd have a feed of wood pigeon. After a day spent on The Arrow with little to show for it, they had retired to their tent, leaving the side flaps open to let in the breeze. They were resting on their cots when Tiny spied the bird sitting in the Lucky Tree. Perched on a crumbling ledge above the river, and growing at a perilous angle which would mean certain death should anyone try to cut it down, it had been spared the usual fate of being turned into firewood or pegs.

Tiny sat up, reached for the rifle, raised it, took aim at the bird, and fired. The pigeon didn't budge, but as if fascinated by the fire and smoke it blinked, and continued to stare at Tiny from its lofty perch. Tiny went outside to meet the courageous bird, raised the rifle and fired again.

"You missed," Pat scoffed from the safety of the tent. "You cock-eyed buffoon! You couldn't hit an elephant if you were right in front of it."

Once again, Tiny took aim. There was a loud bang. Again, the shot missed. The curious bird blinked but didn't move. Seven shots later, Tiny was out of powder and out of sorts.

"Throw the rifle and you may well hit the overstuffed budgerigar," Pat chuckled, amused.

Cursing his bad luck, Tiny threw the empty rifle back in the tent. "Come on," he'd said to Pat, "we may not eat tonight but by God we'll drink."

Together they set off to Fox's township. The pair were great mates, both being red-headed Irishmen who loved to drink. Tiny was a bear of a man with fingers the size of sausages whereas Pat was tall, all bones and cunning.

At *The Oak*, Tiny complained to Ned the barman, that he'd wasted no end of good powder on an enchanted wee beastie in the Lucky Tree.

“Perhaps he was lucky because he was sitting in the Lucky Tree.” The barman tried to jolly Tiny out of his bad humour.

“Or perhaps Tiny’s a rotten shot,” Pat said, elbowing Tiny in the ribs.

“Damn bird was laughing at me,” Tiny muttered darkly. Taking another slug of brandy he emptied the bottle in a single draught.

Chalking it up, Tiny ordered nobbler after nobbler until he was roaring drunk, and Pat’s knees were beginning to buckle.

“Bloody bird was laughing at me!” cried Tiny, thumping his fist on the bar.

Aware of a presence behind him, Tiny turned to see Constable Brick standing there. Arms folded, face stern, the constable looked down his long nose as if summing up how drunk Tiny was, and more importantly, whether he’d be able to take him.

Adding curses for emphasis, Tiny told the constable his story.

Grasping Tiny by the elbow, the constable said, “Come along, man, you’ve had more than your fill tonight.”

Tiny shrugged him off like the nuisance that he was. “He’s one of the little people, I tell you.” He belched, his fummy breath overpowering.

A deep frown appeared between the constable’s thickset, bushy eyebrows. In a stern voice, he said, “Thomas Heenan, I’m arresting you for drunk and disorderly behaviour, and for using obscene language.” Then as if he was coaching a small child, he said softly, “Come along peaceably now, Tiny, that’s the man.”

With no jail to house miscreants, the only method of securing a prisoner was the log. The log, with its thick chain and fettle, was situated on the outskirts of town. Resigned, Tiny went quietly, leaning on the constable for support. Together they negotiated the path. Pat did not pick a fight with Constable Brick as he didn’t fancy time on the log, but he wasn’t going to let his best mate suffer alone. He followed them out into the street. He saw a passed out drunk with a bottle of cheer tucked under his arm lying outside the billiard rooms. Pat plucked the bottle from him and continued on his way the pilfered bottle in his hand, and dodging horse manure, he stumbled along Buckingham Street.

Above the log there was the shade of a lone tree that the prisoner could huddle under. Anyone who dared to chop it down was under the threat of being chained to the log themselves. Compliant, Tiny allowed himself to be chained without argument. He muttered curses as the shackles were placed on his wrists, then slumped heavily on the ground like a sack of coal.

Constable Brick scowled. “Right, man,” he said in a deep rumbling voice, “sleep it off. And, if you give me no further trouble by singing, swearing or causing any other disturbance tonight, I’ll release you come morning.” He patted Tiny’s shoulder.

Tiny frowned up at him thinking the man’s eyebrows looked like two fat hairy slugs. Satisfied, the constable reattached the keys to his belt then walked stiffly, slightly bow-legged back towards town.

Melancholy, his legs sprawled at right angles in front of him, Tiny, leaned against the log and stared at his fettered hands. Pat collapsed beside him and offered Tiny a swig from the almost empty bottle. Thanking him, Tiny drained the last drop. In companionable silence, they used the log as a rough pillow and stared up at the star-studded sky. Stupefied by drink, Pat felt his heavy eyelids close but Tiny continued to peer up at the night sky as if looking for the angels. Just as sleep was beginning to cloud his vision, he caught sight of a wood pigeon, its head on its breast, asleep in the tree. The pigeon opened one eye and winked. Tiny's fingers found a stone, he threw it but missed, the chains preventing his aim being true.

Outraged, Tiny got to his feet. The log was pulled out from under Pat and he landed face first in the dirt. Pat spat, and rubbed the haze from his eyes. Astonished, he watched as Tiny hoisted the huge log onto his shoulder. Like a Scotsman with his caber, Tiny dragged the log up Buckingham Street making a furrow in the dust.

Pat got unsteadily to his feet. Banging the dust off his hat, he put it back on his head and followed his mate into town. Tiny used the log like a battering ram and pushed open *The Oak's* saloon doors. He dragged the log to the bar where he dropped it. It landed with a thud on the flagstone floor, bouncing twice before coming to rest.

Demanding another drink, Tiny told the shocked barman, "Damn bird was laughing at me." The following day arrangements were made to build a permanent jail.

Pat's smile faded as his thoughts turned to the night of the Big Flood. He remembered waking to the sound of a rumbling that grew into a deafening roar. A torrent of water burst around the narrow bend in the river, sweeping away everything in its path, and their tent with it.

Pat woke to find himself amidst the broiling flood waters, and though he tried desperately, he could not find Tiny. And that was the last he ever saw his best mate. That day, due to the many landslides the river changed direction, and the claim they'd worked together as partners was nothing but a washout. Not that it ever yielded much more than a pennyweight. Devastated by loss, Pat's heart was so grieved he had wanted to die too, but something, or someone, always made him cling to life, however tenuous his hold on it might be. After all, his Da returned from the dead; perhaps there was still hope for Tiny.

To hide his tears, Pat, scooped up a handful of chill water and scrubbed his face. God, he missed Tiny.

Pat's hand trembled as he plucked the pea-shaped nugget from the matting and held it up to the receding light. She was a beauty. He glanced sideways at his Da, it never ceased to amaze him that his father trusted him with the gold. A bag of gold on his person was a mighty big temptation. Da said it was to make up for the lost years. Pat knew Da sought to make amends, but while Pat was working on forgiving, he would never forget.

Pat's memory haunted him whenever he thought of that fateful night in '63. The blizzard killed many, some were blown clear off the mountain, some buried where they fell, under several feet of snow. Not knowing if Da was dead or alive, and unable to face the family, Pat didn't return to

Dunedin. Instead he hid in taverns or opium dens trying to forget. But his mother wasn't the kind of woman who would sit idly by and wait. After several weeks, she packed up the family and came looking for them. With one horse between six, the family trekked from Dunedin, and when they arrived at The Arrow footsore and tired, they found Pat in *The Royal* toasting his dear father's memory with his new mate Tiny.

Reluctantly, Pat, told his mother that he'd lost Da on Old Man. Branding him a coward, his mother left him to work his claim with Tiny in peace, and with the gold Da had sent back prior to his disappearance, she bought the Long Gully Pub from a widow who was eager to sell. His three sisters, Annie, God rest her soul, Meg, and Kitty helped Ma run the hotel, while his younger brother, Dan, went off to stake his own claim at Moonlight, a place so rich they now called it The Jeweller's Shop, and his youngest brother, Jack, worked down at The Head of the Lake Timber-mill up until the accident. Now, he was a blacksmith in Queenstown.

Whenever Father Whooley visited, he always reminded the family not to be too hasty to see Jim change. He said, change would come, in time, with love and patience. The new priest, was nothing like that old hypocrite Father Francis, who was so full of hellfire and damnation that you could almost smell the Lake of Fire with every breath the man took. That self-righteous old git refused to give Annie the last rites because he'd heard her child was a bastard. Pat's gut twisted in anger.

Da had returned, but he had lost Annie, and Tiny, and some days his grief threatened to overwhelm him.



Meg had to shade her eyes from the blinding sun which poured through the schoolhouse's open window, but the moment she'd seen him riding over the brow of the hill, she knew who it was. Yankee Brown had a peculiar riding style. Hoping to flee before he arrived, Meg hurried outside to lock the schoolhouse but to her dismay, she heard the thundering of horse's hooves rapidly approaching, and she knew she wouldn't make it. The horse and rider stopped. Meg fumbled nervously turning the key in the door. She turned.

Yankee swung down from the saddle and stood beside his horse. He patted Lucky's neck while studying her with his cool blue eyes.

Doffing his broad Southwester, Yankee smiled. "Miss Margaret."

Meg couldn't pretend she didn't see him; nor could she escape, for behind her was the sanctuary of the schoolhouse which he had just seen her lock and before her the path which he now blocked. Trapped, she gasped for air while he looked calm and relaxed. He may have been a whaler's son but, Yankee had a ruggedly cocky air about him that made folks believe he was born for better things. Tall and handsome, he was lean with broad shoulders, and sandy hair that framed a noble face and matched his moustache and beard.

Refusing to give him the satisfaction of knowing his nearness affected her, Meg lifted her chin and met his gaze. "Mr Brown." His hair and beard had grown.

Hat in hand, he took a step towards her. "How's the school ma'am?" he drawled.

Meg took a step. "Well, thank you," she answered primly.

He made a great show of putting his hat on and nodded. "Aye, you look well an' all," he agreed gazing down at her with open appreciation.

Meg sought a suitable response, failing to find one she left it hanging.

He took another step, his hobnail boots heavy on the gravel. "As for myself I'm doing mighty fine. Thanks for asking, Miss Margaret." He waited letting the words sink in.

She forced a smile. "So I've heard." Her brother, Dan, had been quick to tell her. Surely he hadn't come all this way to brag. He looked a little thicker round the middle, his eyes less hollow. He'd been eating well. What was it about him that rattled her?

"Mighty fine indeed," he repeated. He hooked a finger in his braces.

There was that jauntiness again, that devil-may-care attitude, the way he could laugh at anything. It needed her.

Yankee lifted his chin. "And Mr Burns? How goes his venture?"

Her eyes narrowed. He was deliberately provoking her and she resented him for it. News travelled fast, and just as she knew he was raking in gold at the Jeweller's Shop, Yankee would have heard rumours about The Alliance. They were only just setting up the sluicing company, tunnelling was going well, but the sourcing of equipment for more extensive mining operations such as dredging, were looking costly and the transport too difficult. William's grand schemes were beginning to cause ill feeling between him and Lord Asterly, who was of the opinion a dredge or a battery wouldn't pay its way. William begged to differ, and was adamant that he should be allowed to experiment.

Once, in a temper, William hotly declared to Meg that Asterly was as shy as a maiden when it came to business. He thought he should be allowed to take risks that they could well afford to take. The miners were beginning to take sides and it looked as if the partnership could be dissolved. The tension between Lord Asterly and William was obvious to all, and for Meg, still living under the Asterlys roof, it made life difficult.

Lucky stretched her long neck and ripped the grass at Meg's feet.

"I don't really know," Meg said, telling a bare-faced lie. "I leave the business up to them. I am," she looked at him pointedly, "only a woman after all."

"Aye," he grinned, giving her the once over, "but what a woman."

Yankee's arrogant flirting irritated her further. "It's been," Meg paused trying to think of a suitable word, "ah... a surprise to see you Mr Brown," she said coolly.

He cocked an eyebrow. "A pleasurable one, I hope?"

Ignoring him, Meg continued, "I offer you my hearty congratulations on your most remarkable success." She gave him a perfunctory nod, signalling the end of the conversation.

Yankee stroked his beard. "Aye it is truly remarkable. I can hardly believe it myself. Have to pinch myself most days."

He was so self-assured she wanted to throttle him. "Well, I must be on my way." Meg waited for him to move aside but Yankee didn't budge. Planting his feet astride he stayed riveted to the spot. He let go the reins and allowed his horse its head. When she attempted to go around him, he caught her by the sleeve.

"I love you," he said quietly dropping the façade. The softness of his voice penetrated her eggshell heart. She could feel the warmth of his fingers through the fabric of her dress. Fearing he would see the uncertainty in her eyes, Meg kept her head down.

"Have you accepted Burns' proposal?"

Meg nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

His face fell. "Why?"

She simply hadn't found a reason to refuse.

"Why do that, when you know I love you?" He placed his finger under her chin and encouraged her to lift her head. She did so reluctantly.

His cool blue eyes studied hers. "You love me, don't deny it?"

Meg's thoughts were crashing violently one upon another like the waves on a West Coast beach. The arrangements had been made, and Kitty had almost certainly finished the dress. Everything was ready. It was too late, much too late.

Meg shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said backing away. Sidestepping past him, she hurried down the path, her pace quickening with each step.

"You're making a terrible mistake," he called after her.

Head held high, back ramrod straight, Meg walked on briskly.

"I plan to take a wife," he shouted, his voice carrying on the warm breeze.

She stopped, then walked on willing herself not to look back, or run.

The horse's retreating hooves sounded like a drumbeat in her ears. Meg waited till she was sure Yankee was far enough away that he could no longer see her, then she made a mad dash through the long grass up to the graveyard. The iron-gate clanged with a hollow ring as it shut behind her. Reaching the simple white cross with its blood red rose, not caring if she soiled her long skirts she crossed herself, fell to her knees and fastened her hands in prayer.



The tussocks, rocks and scrubby low-lying trees clinging to the shingle banks went past in a blur of green, gold, and grey. It was if the river was racing him back home to Moonlight. Bent low over his horse's back, Yankee rode for all he was worth. He knew he shouldn't ride Lucky hard over the rough terrain but he needed an outlet. He wanted to challenge Meg, make her see reason but Meg was a stubborn mule and any attempt to change her mind would only make her more determined.

Last year, she had said things like, she didn't want a miner for a husband. Didn't want a man with wanderlust in his veins who would disappear with the next big rush. So, he bought Riverstones Station. And because she said she didn't want to live in a dirty hovel raising children like rats, he made sure there was a decent homestead on the property. Hiring a manager and farmhands had

taken time and effort and meant many trips to visit his investment. Getting farmhands was hard work since every man and his dog wanted to earn a quick fortune on the goldfields, but he'd managed it. He was about to ask for her hand in marriage when word reached him that while he was busy doing all that to please her, Meg had accepted that splay-legged, arrogant peacock's, proposal. It was a bitter pill to swallow to try and please a woman only to have it blow up in your face.

He passed people coming along the track but didn't slow down or stop to pass the time of day. He was angry and didn't know what to do about it. He'd travelled up to Skippers especially to ask her to reconsider – and, if he was honest, to brag. But money and property weren't enough when what he wanted most was Meg. Beautiful, spirited, stubborn Meg, with her nut-brown hair, big brown eyes, porcelain skin and cherry lips. To him she was as fresh as summer rain and as sweet smelling as lavender oil, and he wanted her to be his wife.

But instead of being pleased to see him, she looked like a startled doe, wary and ready to take flight. She was afraid of him, yet he'd never done anything to harm her. No, all he'd ever done was love her, yet she spurned his every attempt, preferring instead that stuck up, trussed goose, Burns, with his charming tongue and flashy ways.

He slowed his horse to a walk as a thick blanket of melancholy came upon him. What was the use of all his money if he didn't have someone to share his fortune with? He felt her rejection as keenly as a stab from a red-hot poker. It stuck in his craw he had gone to all that trouble for nought. He might as well drown his sorrows with the drink as her heart would never be his.



Pink, violet, and yellow lupines lined the track like a glorious guard of honour. The sun was warm on Kitty's young freckled face and a soft breeze tickled a few red curls loose from the confines of her bonnet. Kitty had a talent for dressmaking, but her mother being a practical woman did not hold with finery where it was not needed, so Kitty wore a simple grey day dress, for as her mother said, to wear anything else in this environment would be a sin.

She carried her parcel carefully so as not to wrinkle or spoil it. Lady Asterly had kindly invited her stay the night, and her mother being in a congenial mood had allowed her to go, without Grace. Being away from the endless chores was a small taste of freedom to relish. Not one to believe in idleness, Kitty's mother believed it was better to wear out than rust, and if Mary Healey had anything to do with it, no one would ever rust.

The letter in her petticoat pocket felt like it was burning a hole in the fabric. To ensure Ma didn't get wind of it, Kitty knew she must slip it to Dusty away from the hotel, and quickly, or the placement would be gone. Granny McNab offered to write the letter of recommendation, but was afraid Mary Healey would strip the skin of her bones for interfering. Granny was not a relative, but a kindly old widow who lived with her bachelor son over at Greengate. Granny recognised Kitty's talent for sewing and encouraged her in it. No, Kitty decided, there was no point getting Ma all riled

up for nothing, other girls would apply and she might not be offered an apprenticeship, but Mary, Mother of God, she wanted it.

She neared Pinchers Bluff, a harrowing stretch of road. A packer's life was a dangerous one, there were places where one wrong footfall could send you to your death. She checked the position of the sun; Dusty should be along any time soon. He was a funny wee fellow, wizened and gritty, he loved his horses more than people but he delighted in a good gossip and loved to pass on a juicy morsel or two.

Suddenly a horse and rider appeared and came thundering towards her. Kitty backed into the rock face, and turned her head as the horse and rider passed by in a choking cloud of dust. She coughed and blinked as the dust settled. Blame fool could break his neck, Kitty thought, peeved.

She dusted herself off and continued on, her head busy with thoughts. What if she was offered a place – what then? She'd have a time of it convincing her mother to let her go. Kitty saw the dust and heard the jangle of horses' harnesses long before the pack ponies came into view. Dusty was out front holding the leader's reins, his trusty ponies following faithfully behind, heads bobbing, their backs swayed from heavy loads.

Heart hammering, Kitty took the letter from its hiding place and held it in her hand, ready.

"Whoa there," Dusty called to his girls. The ponies stopped, raised their heads and huffed, examining Kitty as if they expected some treat to be produced.

"Miss Kitty," Dusty said, touching a hand to his battered black hat. His bushy silver eyebrows met. "Where are you off to young lady?"

"Morning, Dusty, I'm going to visit Meg. I've finished her wedding gown," Kitty said, holding the parcel out to him.

Dusty smiled showing a row of yellow stumps. "You're rare good with a needle Miss Kitty. I'm sure you've done a fine job of it and all. Why, you ought to be a seamstress." Not a man given to excesses so a compliment from him was to be cherished.

"Why, thank you," Kitty replied, pleased. She took a deep breath, it was now or never. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Ah, Dusty, I have a letter. I wonder if this could be kept just between us."

Dusty took exception to the inference. Heckles raised, he declared, "All the mail is safe with me, miss."

"I wasn't implying..." Kitty hastened to add but was interrupted.

Suspicious, he squinted at her, "Here, it's not a love letter, is it?"

"No." Kitty was shocked. "No, Dusty, I promise it's no such thing." Hand on her heart, she said, "It's a surprise for my parents, is all."

His leathery face softened, "Oh that's all right then, give it here I'll put it with the rest of the mail."

"So, if there's a return letter..." she lifted an eyebrow.

“My ‘orses won’t breathe a word,” he teased, tapping a finger to his nose. Taking the envelope from her, he deposited it in his mail satchel and refastened the leather straps. “Don’t you worry none, your secret is safe with me, Missy,” Dusty assured her, the old twinkle back in his eye. “Righto, I can’t dally about here all day, I must be on my way. Congratulate Miss Meg for me, she’s caught a good one there I’ll wager. Still,” he said, running his fingers through his long scraggy whiskers, “I expect I’ll be seeing her myself, as she’ll be ordering special things for the nuptials, eh?”

“I’m sure she will,” Kitty replied.

Kitty watched Dusty’s animals follow him around the bend and disappear from sight. Glory be she’d done it! Now, all she had to do was sit tight and wait, and hope the waiting didn’t kill her. With a nervous skip in her step, Kitty continued on her way.



Meg absently fingered the petals of the red rose that blossomed on Annie’s grave. A thorn scratched her, she sucked the spot of blood on her finger. She sat in the graveyard for a long time, and prayed hard, prayed to all the patron saints in Ireland, and to any whom would see fit to work on her behalf but there was only eerie silence from the hollow blue sky. Not even a whisper of comfort from the long grass. The loss of her sister seemed even harder to bear these days when she so desperately needed a friend and confidant. Why did Annie have to die? Meg’s prayers littered her heavy heart. Confused, she sat back on her heels and buried her head in her hands. Was Yankee right? Was she making a mistake?

She thought back to the first time she had met Yankee. He had come to the hotel with her brother, Dan. He was handsome and made her laugh. She thought he was interested in Annie. Besides, she had always told everyone she’d never be silly enough to marry a miner, and in fact would probably never marry at all, but instead enjoy a teaching career and die a spinster. Yet whenever Yankee Brown was near, she was nervous, and acted like a tongue-tied fool. Somehow he made her feel – vulnerable.

Yankee had driven her up to the Asterlys after her big fight with Ma, he’d been thoughtful and kind. He’d protected her the night of the big storm, he’d held her close and told her he loved her. The truth was she was afraid of him. He was a miner with wanderlust in his veins. He might disappear one day, like her father had, but not return. Meg believed if you loved someone with your whole heart they could hurt you beyond repair. Granted, he’d bought Riverstones Station on the other side of the lake, but he had station hands and a farm manager to work it while he chose to remain on the fields but what was to stop him going to the next big rush? The digger’s life was a transient one, and many had left as soon as they heard news of the strikes being found in the West Coast. Why had he stayed? Had he truly stayed because of her?

Meg felt like a small boat tossed on stormy seas. Perhaps if she saw William she would know she had made the right decision. She brushed down her skirts and hurried back to the Asterlys homestead. She ran up the path, the stairs, and burst through the door. Startled, Lady Asterly put a warning finger to lips, signalling that baby Henry had just gone down.

“Sorry,” Meg apologised.

Worried by the harried look on Meg’s face, she asked, “Is everything all right my dear? You look like you have seen a ghost.”

Meg pressed a hand to the grabbing stitch in her side. “William,” she puffed. “Is William, up at the mine? Do you know?”

Lady Asterly shook her head. “Sorry my dear, I don’t know.” Lady Asterly steered Meg into the sitting room and to the nearest chair. “But you look like you could do with a nice cup of tea. I’ll tell Lottie to put the kettle on.”

Meg fell into the large gold-velvet armchair and gripped the ornate arms as if they were her anchor. Lady Asterly settled herself in the armchair opposite and studied Meg while she waited for Lottie to bring the tea.

Meg glanced up when she heard the rattle of cups as Lottie wheeled the tea trolley into the sitting room. She would have liked to strike up a friendship with Lottie but the girl was the most nondescript, sullen person, Meg had ever met. Deathly pale, she moved around the house as silently as a vapour. It was like Lottie had no soul, she never laughed or smiled, she just existed.

Lady Asterly waited patiently for Lottie to leave the room, then she poured the tea. Meg didn’t know how Lady Asterly did it, but before you knew it, you had bared your soul to the bone. Meg prepared herself to resist Lady Asterly’s kid gloved interrogation - the little woman could prize a pearl out an oyster just by looking at it with her soft dove-grey eyes.



Kitty pressed on, she waved out to a few diggers as she passed, some waved back, most didn’t notice her. There were numerous scars cut into the hills from machinery. Some sluicing guns were now operating on the terraces on the other side of the bank, and huge jets of water rocketed into the air.

At the waterfall called Bridal Veil, she cupped her hand and drank a couple of mouthfuls of chill water. If they accepted her for the apprenticeship, what then? What if they didn’t? She closed her eyes trying to shut out the pain. They must say yes. Shaking off the dark thoughts, she continued on. She crossed the hastily constructed lower bridge and climbed the hill to Asterlys Terrace.

The Asterlys homestead was grand compared to the ramshackle cottages and huts that were scattered like a gambler throws dice. Gold fever running rife in their veins, miners gave little thought to their own comfort, while they had breath in their bodies, their only waking thoughts were to win as much gold as they were able.

Kitty climbed the front porch steps, stopped at the top, caught her breath, and knocked.

“Katherine!” Lady Asterly cried opening the door. “How lovely to see you.”

“Thank you for inviting me,” Kitty smiled.

“My pleasure,” Lady Asterly assured her beckoning her inside.

Putting the parcel on the wall stand, Kitty removed her bonnet and gloves.

Excited, Lady Asterly squeaked, “Is it?”

“Yes,” Kitty replied, beaming with pride.

“Wonderful!” Lady Asterly clasped Kitty’s hands in hers, and whispered in her ear, “The cake is iced.”

In the background Kitty could see Lottie moving about as silently as a shadow. Kitty wondered if some terrible tragedy had befallen Lottie, and she could not bear to speak of it. Kitty picked up the parcel, and followed Lady Asterly into the sitting room, where Meg sat glumly staring at the rug.

Meg lifted her head. “It’s nice to see you, Kitty.”

“And you, Meg,” Kitty returned. She loved this house. Kitty looked admiringly around the room, even with a new baby in residence the place was spic and span. There was only the one servant, but Lady Asterly was a perfectionist, and liked everything neat and tidy, and in its proper place. The fireplace had been polished with black-lead and shone like ebony. Gold-velvet armchairs sat either side of a pink velvet chaise lounge, and tapestry footstools were placed to the side, while a bear rug with its yawning mouth, lay stretched out on the floor before the fireplace. Silver and china treasures were beautifully displayed in highly polished walnut cabinets. White lace dollies and ornate fine porcelain vases stood proudly on top of a small round walnut table. Beautiful hand painted china and brass lanterns hung from the ceiling. Lady Asterly’s own handiwork adorned the walls and chairs. Everything was tasteful, and in harmony with its surroundings.

“You must be tired, take a seat, my dear. Would you like a fresh cup?” Lady Asterly offered, her hand hovering over the teapot.

“Yes, thank you,” Kitty replied. Turning to Meg and ceremoniously presenting the parcel, Kitty said, “I brought you your gown.”

Meg stared at the parcel on her lap.

“I hope you like it.” Kitty took a seat besides Meg.

“I’ll love it,” Meg answered, bleakly.

Kitty frowned, puzzled by Meg’s reaction.

Lady Asterly poured the milk and added sugar, gave it a quick stir then handed Kitty the cup and saucer.

Kitty sipped her tea and glanced out the latticed window. “Where are the children?” she asked.

Lady Asterly smiled. “They went to the bakery with their father a little while ago they should be back soon.” Lady Asterly raised her eyes to the ceiling. “And the baby, bless his heart, is sleeping. He suffers dreadfully with colic, poor dear.”

“Poor darling,” agreed Kitty.

“How are your parents, are they well?”

“Fighting fight,” Kitty grinned.

Lady Asterly smiled discreetly.

“And Grace?” Meg asked.

“Walking,” Kitty boasted as proudly as if Grace were her own.

“That’s wonderful,” Meg exclaimed, surprised.

Kitty giggled. "Ma doesn't think so - she's had to move everything up higher to keep Grace from getting into it. You can hear Ma muttering 'wee besom' all over the hotel."

Meg widened her eyes at her sister in disapproval. Kitty mouthed an apology.

Meg gently untied the string and peeked inside the tissue paper. "Oh Kitty," she breathed.

"Why don't you go to your room, and try on the gown while the children are away," Lady Asterly suggested. "You won't get a moment's peace when they return."

Kitty plucked at Meg's sleeve. "Yes Meg, come on."

A loud squawk came from upstairs.

"Oh dear, there's little Henry now, he's not been down nearly long enough." The crying grew louder and Lady Asterly hurriedly left the room.

Meg's room was out through the back door on the left-hand side of the porch. Kitty adored it. Kitty felt a pinch of jealousy. Meg was so lucky. There was a sash window with cross over lace curtains and sage-green velvet drapes, a double bed with a fine sage patchwork quilt, and a nice wooden dresser on which stood a blue china washbasin and pitcher, and at the far end of the room stood a large oval mirror. Kitty pulled the drapes to and Meg began to undress.

"Long white gloves and it will be perfect," Kitty said, tying the sash in place. The dress fitted perfectly. It had a high lace collar and lace cuffs, a white ribbon sash around the middle, three tiny embroidered rose buds across the bodice and pearl buttons down the back. It was a gown fit for a princess and with Meg's long slender frame, dark hair swept up in a bun, she looked beautiful.

Kitty stepped back and cocked her head to one side. "Oh Meg," she sighed, pleased.

Meg stared at herself in mirror. "Thank you, Kitty, it is lovely. The detailing is just right and the lace not overdone." She took a deep breath and placed her hand on the washstand to steady herself.

Alarmed, Kitty's asked, "Are you all right? Do you feel faint?"

"Nerves," Meg answered turning away from the mirror. She placed a hand on her stomach and breathed deeply trying to calm herself. "I don't know if I'm ready to be a wife, or if I'll be a good one."

An invisible hand squeezed Kitty's heart, she chided herself for having such mean thoughts. Hugging Meg, she said, "Don't be silly, you'll make a wonderful wife and mother, you know how to cook and clean, and you are great with children. Besides," Kitty smiled as she added, "you are the best teacher in the district."

The corners of Meg's mouth twitched into a smile. "It's not hard to be the best at something when you are the only one."

"Precisely," Kitty laughed, her bright eyes shining.

They returned to the sitting room where they found little Henry, red-faced from crying, sitting on Lady Asterly's lap chewing his wooden rattle, dribble freely running down his chin.

A few minutes later Lord Asterly arrived home with the Asterly girls, little Miss Amelia and Miss Mabel. They entered the sitting room, their hands and faces thick and sticky with toffee.

Horrified, Lady Asterly shooed them away. "Look at you!" she scolded. "Like street urchins the pair of you. Go wash your hands and faces, then you can come back and say hello to young Miss Healey properly."

Hesitant to venture further, Lord Asterly stood in the doorway. "Good day, Miss Healey," he said stiffly with a slight bow.

"Good day," Kitty replied, amused. Lord Asterly might be in charge of men at the mine but his wife was clearly mistress of the home.

He excused himself saying he had some business to attend to at the mine. "I'll be back in time for supper," he told his wife, making a hasty escape.

Faces freshly washed, the girls came back and presented themselves to their guest. Amelia, being a shy, quiet child, hung back, watching from a distance, but little Mabel as curious as a kitten, cooly wormed her way closer until she was happily sitting on Kitty's lap.

"What do the letters say?" Mabel asked poking a chubby finger at the engraving on Kitty's signet ring.

"*Gentleness and Mercy*," Kitty told her.

"The other Miss Healey has one too," Mabel said pointing at Meg.

"Aye, hers says *Faithful and True*. Our father had them made for us," Kitty told Mabel. "Our other sister's one said, *Goodness and Kindness*."

Mabel looked up at Kitty and frowned. "Where's your sister? Is she at home with your mother?"

"No, Annie's with the angels now," Kitty said quietly.

"Oh," Mabel's face fell. "Our brother, Benjamin, died too. He fell off the flying-fox and drowned. He's hiding in a hole in the ground and won't come out. Is your sister in the ground?"

"Yes, but that's just her body, she's with the angels now."

Meg flashed Kitty a warning look. Kitty had her own curious set of beliefs and was free with them. Protestant, Lord Asterly tolerated Catholics in his house as long as they didn't share beliefs.

"Did she take her ring with her to Heaven?" asked Mabel.

"No," Kitty replied trying to think of a fitting answer. "Our mother is keeping it safe until Annie's daughter, Grace, is old enough to wear it."

Mabel was about to ask more questions when Lady Asterly interrupted, "Mabel dear, please go and get your slate and show younger Miss Healey how you can write your letters."

"I'll draw a picture of your sister with the angels," Mabel promised, wiggling off Kitty's knee.

Mabel drew pictures while Amelia played a tune on the pianoforte for Kitty's entertainment. Mabel loved the novelty of Kitty being at the homestead, and chatted away merrily filling the air with so many words that Kitty almost had to beg her to stop. Lady Asterly came to the rescue by telling the children it was time to wash for supper.

Supper was served by Lottie, who silently went about her chores. And Meg was almost as morose. Throughout supper, Meg remained distant, other than occasionally reminding the children

of their manners she barely participated in conversation. Kitty had expected Meg to gush with praise over her gown, instead, she scarcely said a word.

“What’s wrong?” Kitty whispered when Lady Asterly’s back was turned.

“Nothing,” Meg replied with a shrug.

Kitty felt a stab of disappointment. Meg didn’t trust her. Thought she was too young to understand, no doubt, well she was old enough to feel hurt and she felt hurt now. Meg should have been delighted with the beautiful gown she’d made her, she’d put so much time and effort into its creation, if not her heart. Being around Meg tonight was as depressing as the darkest day in winter, and the fact that Meg wouldn’t confide in her, only served to irritate Kitty further. Clearly Meg had decided she was too young to understand matters of the heart. Well, Kitty thought piqued, she knew what it was to love someone and not have them love you in return.



Desperate for air, Kitty escaped while Meg got the children ready for bed. She needed to talk to Annie. It was approaching dusk when she trod the familiar path to the graveyard. The moon, hung like a sliced silver platter in the sky, the ground beneath her boots was damp and soft. Kitty took a moment to compose herself, she believed the dead deserved the dignity. Sometimes she missed Annie so much it felt like a deep ache. Their father said, Annie was too good for this world, and for that reason she had been taken from this world to be with the angels in the next. Kitty thought God was punishing them for the lie. Annie should have been the one enjoying seeing Grace take her first steps, and Annie should have been the one marrying William.

Kitty pushed open the gate and closed it quietly behind her. Careful not to disturb the dead, she tiptoed across the shadowy graveyard towards the simple white cross bearing the wrong name. Kissing her fingertips, Kitty touched the top of the wooden cross as if hoping to reach across the great divide separating the living and the dead. Kneeling on the cold, hard ground and taking a smooth round quartz stone out of her pocket Kitty placed it on the grave, crossed herself, and clasped her hands in prayer.

Kitty went through her rosary praying her normal recitations, then said aloud, “Forgive me,” the words were caught by an invisible hand and thrown like a pebble across the thin night air. “I know it’s a sin but I...I’m...”

“Kitty? Miss Kitty?” called a voice she recognized.

Kitty’s mouth fell open. Was it a sign? Had Annie sent her a sign?

“Yes?” she answered turning quickly. She scrambled to her feet and smoothed down her crumpled skirts.

The gate opened, and clanged shut, footsteps hurried to her side. William Burns stood beside her. Tall and immaculately dressed, William was a handsome man with his dark hair and well-groomed goateed beard, mature looking for his twenty-three years.

He touched a hand to the rim of his top hat. "Miss Kitty what are you doing here at this time of night? It's not safe." But before Kitty could answer, he said, "Does your mother know where you are?"

Annoyed at being scolded like she was a naughty child, Kitty took a breath. "No, my mother doesn't know I'm here Mr Burns, however she does know I'm staying with the Asterlys tonight."

"But you shouldn't be here," he protested. "It's not safe."

Kitty tried to explain. "I needed to talk to Annie - alone. You do understand, don't you?" Of course, he did.

His expression softened. "I come here sometimes when I've got things on my mind," he admitted. "But this is not the time for a young lady to be visiting a graveyard. The Otago Hotel is nearby, not to mention the sly grog shanties, too many men under the influence of the drink and ...," he trailed off not wanting to alarm her. "It's best we be getting you back to the Asterlys." He tucked her arm in his and herded her towards the gate.

She held onto his arm and allowed him to lead, and waited while he opened the gate for her. He walked briskly and Kitty had to take two steps to each of his long-legged strides. They walked along the path back to the Asterlys house. When they reached the top step, he let go of Kitty's arm, straightened his jacket, knocked and waited.

Meg opened the door and was surprised to find them on the stoop, preoccupied with getting the children to bed, she hadn't noticed Kitty slip out.

William removed his hat and tucked it under his arm. "How are you my dear?" he asked bowing slightly in deference.

Meg's smile did not quite reach her eyes. "Fine" she lied. She wondered if she should mention Yankee's visit. Maybe she should leave it be, but what if someone else said something?

William allowed Kitty to go inside first, then followed. They crowded the entrance way.

Meg said, "Did Kitty tell you she delivered my wedding gown today?"

He raised his eyebrows at Kitty. "No, she did not."

Kitty waited expectantly, hoping for Meg to tell William how much she loved it.

Bemused, Meg said, "And now here you are delivering Kitty."

He nodded grimly, his face serious. "I found her wandering like a stray puppy in the dark, and thought best return to the fireplace, where she would be safe and warm."

"I was visiting Annie," Kitty mumbled. She could feel her bottom lip starting to jut, and a fine pout developing. She wanted to say she's better company than you Meg, but held her tongue.

"Thank you, William, it's thoughtful of you, isn't it Kitty?" Meg prompted.

Angry she was being coached, Kitty murmured her thanks.

"Would you like to take tea with us?" Meg asked, looking questioningly up at William.

"No thank you, Margaret, but perhaps you would care to join me outside on the settle?"

Meg hesitated. Turning to Kitty she said, "The Asterlys are in the sitting room reading the children bedtime stories. Lady Asterly is a fine storyteller, if you hurry you'll not miss the end."

Kitty disappeared into the next room, closing the door abruptly behind her.

William presented his arm. "Shall we?"

Meg draped her shawl around her shoulders and stepped outside. William followed, closing the door gently behind them.

Stars were beginning to pinprick the night sky. The settle on the veranda was cold and uninviting but it afforded some privacy. William's leg brushed hers as they sat down.

"Is everything all right, my dear?" William asked, his arm resting on the back of the settle. "Are you ill?"

"I'm fine," she assured him. She turned the question. "How are you?"

William lowered his voice. "I don't know what's wrong with Asterly. He's been particularly obstructive of late. I've been pushing for a dredge operation but he's against it, he thinks it would be unsustainable." He sighed. "He says getting the equipment here would out-weigh any benefit but I beg to differ. We have been arguing ever since. Just as well the sluicing is going well or I would...", aware she wasn't listening he broke off. "Does that trouble you?"

"No." She gazed down at her hands resting tidily on her lap, her father's signet ring on one hand and William's on the other. She took a deep breath then the words came out in a rush. "William, are you quite sure you want to marry me?"

"Nothing surer," he smiled, his arm coming to rest on her shoulder. Checking to see no one was around he drew her close. "How can I convince you?" he whispered in her ear. "Tell me what to do and I'll do it." When Meg didn't reply, he ploughed on, "Haven't I agreed that you can continue to teach, even though people might think I cannot support a wife if I send her out to work?"

Meg shied away. Adopting her haughty voice, she replied, "Teaching gives me great satisfaction, William. Education makes a difference in my pupils' lives, it gives them choices."

William nodded. "I don't doubt it my dear," he said catching her hand bringing it to his lips. "But when we have children of our own Margaret, I'd like you to mind them." He let her hand fall.

Meg bit her lip. She wanted children, of course she did, but there was plenty of time wasn't there? She was only coming seventeen. She shivered. For there to be children, there would have to be intercourse and then should she get with child she might die in the delivery, or the child might, pregnancy was dangerous business. Annie had not shared what it was like to make love other than to say it hurt. Annie was sent away until the time to give birth was near. After Grace was born, she bled out, and died. The world felt a darker place without her. Grace was beautiful though, a little piece of Annie left behind to help make their loss easier to bear. She drew her shawl close.

"You're cold, come we should go inside."

"A ghost walked over my grave is all," Meg assured him. And a ghost had. She had seen a vision of Annie with her slick dark hair fanned out on the starched white pillow, her crying new born babe tucked into the crook of her arm, and blood - everywhere. Childbirth killed Annie, what was to stop it killing her? Panic began to beat inside Meg's ribcage like a trapped bird. What if she died trying to give birth to William's children? What if, like Annie, she died before her seventeenth birthday?

Meg's thoughts drifted back to her meeting with Yankee. What she should have said? What she should have done? Worry continued to gnaw at her like a rat refusing to leave a scrap.

She twisted the engagement ring on her finger. Her signet ring said *'Faithful and True'*. She had accepted William's proposal and the honourable thing to do would be to see it through. William was a good man and she admired him. Was it enough?

William leaned closer. "What's wrong?" he asked. A large moth flew in his face he batted it away. "Don't you like the dress?"

"It's beautiful. Kitty did a grand job."

He sat back, frowning. "Is it the preparations then?"

"No, no it's all going well. Lady Asterly is enjoying the challenge of organizing the picnic, and Ma is letting her have her way. That in itself is a miracle," Meg admitted, smiling despite the growing knot of worry in her stomach.

Tired of guessing, William got to the point, "Then, what is troubling you?"

"Yankee Brown came to visit today," she said, gazing into the distance.

"Oh?" William's arm tensed. There was a long drawn out pause. "And?"

"Nothing." Meg avoided his eyes. "I just thought you should know."

Jealousy pricked, William's voice was short when he asked, "What did he want?"

Meg shrugged. "Nothing, other than to tell me he plans to wed."

William's shoulders relaxed. "Oh. That's good news."

"Yes, I think so," Meg watched as moths drawn to the light of the outside lanterns danced a deadly dance, perhaps they were mating, and dying.

William gave her knee a gentle squeeze. "See, I told you that everything would turn out all right in the end."

She desperately needed to confide in someone, visiting Annie's grave was not offering any solace these days, and Kitty wasn't old enough to understand. No, Meg decided, for want of anyone better, it would have to be her mother, for as much as she hated to admit it, Ma knew her better than she knew herself. "I'd better go inside, the Asterlys and Kitty will be wondering..."

"Not without a kiss," William said. Lifting her chin, he pressed his lips to hers.

Meg pulled away and abruptly stood up. "Goodnight William," she said quickly, and vanished inside.

Perplexed, Burns lingered for a few minutes frowning at the closed door. It had been a strange evening. After a day spent arguing with Asterly, he had been on his way to the Otago Hotel for a drink when he stumbled across Kitty, alone in the cemetery, and then Margaret's behaviour towards him was...odd, cold even. It made him feel uneasy. He shook his head trying to dispel the worm of worry. Seeing the lights of the Otago hotel winking in the distance he tapped his top hat twice so it settled nicely on his head, and feeling the pull of the tavern, he walked down the forked path and took the track on the left.

The nerve of that weasel Brown turning up here unsettling Margaret like that. He comforted himself in the fact he had won Margaret's heart fair and square. She had accepted his proposal and that was that. But for the life of him he couldn't understand why Margaret doubted his devotion? He had not compared her to Annie since the day they met.

The moment he met Annie, he was enchanted. He waited a respectable time before coming to Long Gully to declare his love for the young widow, and ask for her hand, only to be told Annie had died two months prior. As he'd gotten to know Margaret he soon realized although they looked similar they were very different in nature. Annie was gentle, as graceful as a swan and as peaceful as a dove. Margaret might look delicate, but she had strong opinions, and was as determined as an ox. He smiled recollecting her father saying, they were like the two local waterfalls, Gentle Annie and Roaring Meg.

There were times he wished Margaret wasn't quite so headstrong, especially when it came to educating the miners' children. He feared she would get too attached to her pupils and because Asterly was resisting his ideas they may have no other choice but to sell up and move on. It was probably best not to mention that until after the wedding - Margaret wouldn't want to leave the school, or her family behind. There was not long to wait, a few weeks and they would be wed. As he drew nearer the Otago Hotel his spirits lifted at the sound of the honky-tonk being played on piano. He entered the lively, noisy tavern and hung his hat on the peg. His rival Yankee Brown was engaged! Now that was something worth celebrating. Yes, by God he'd drink to that.

Chapter 2

Bruised

Marnie lay in a wretched heap on the cold wooden floor. She should have known better. They were never going to let her waltz out the door. The moment she mentioned Jack's name she could tell she had made a grave mistake. Madame raised her arm and struck Marnie hard, leaving a stinging imprint on her face. Marnie held her smarting cheek, her blue eyes filling with tears.

Hands curling into fists, Madame summoned Bill. Rumour had it that Bill was the Madame's son but no one knew for sure. A simpleton, Bill was a bull of a man, all muscles, no neck and little brain. He kept the girls and patrons in check, and Madame kept him. Together they dragged Marnie into Madame's chambers, where Bill gave her a beating like no other. Small and slightly built, Marnie was no match for the muscle-bound bully who delivered her punishment. Hands protectively covering her head, she cowered, whimpering in the corner, hoping the end was near. Experience had taught her that it was best to stay down and keep quiet, and never answer back. Her right eye was swelling shut, her bottom lip was thick and split and she feared he may have cracked a rib. Frightened to move, she gasped in pain.

Bill stepped back and waited for further instruction. Arms folded across his expansive chest, he barred the door. There was no hope of escape. Her dark eyes flashing, Madame called down all manner of curses upon Marnie's head, and forbid Marnie to see, or ever speak to Jack Healey again.

“Do you understand?” Madame shrieked, her large bosom heaving.

Sobbing, Marnie nodded.

“Take her to her room, and make sure she stays there,” Madame barked at Bill.

Marnie’s tears blinded her as she struggled to her feet. She pressed her hand against the tongue-and-groove wall to steady herself and walked the narrow passage with Bill close on her heels. Reaching her room, Marnie twisted the brass doorknob, as she opened the door Bill gave her one last shove for good measure which sent her sprawling. She lay in a crumpled heap on the floor, eyes closed trying to shut out the pain. Marnie heard the door close and the key turn in the lock. She crawled to the rag mat. After a few minutes, she pulled herself up onto her bed where she lay curled in on herself like a sleeping fern frond, arms protectively wrapped around her belly.

Marnie hadn’t expected much out of life. When news of gold broke, her family travelled from impoverished Ireland to lawless Ballarat when she was a child. Her father never struck it rich and they lived a destitute existence. Her mother died in childbirth, and the babe with her, leaving Marnie the only child from her parents’ union. Blonde with big blue eyes, small and sweet-natured, Marnie had been cursed with prettiness. From the age of seven her father taught her things children do not tell. At ten her father died but she never shed a tear in mourning at his passing. Madame found her starving and sleeping rough on the streets and took her in. Madame fed her and groomed her, even paid for her passage to New Zealand. Marnie felt a strange sort of loyalty

to a woman who made a lot of money from her body, of which Marnie saw none. Madame told Marnie she was keeping it safe for her. Still, she lacked for nothing - she was fed and clothed, and had a roof over her head. Customers gave her expensive presents, mostly perfume and jewellery, and she was everyone's favourite, for Marnie knew when to dimple, when to laugh, and how to please as Madame had groomed her well. She knew everything but how to live outside the four walls of her plush prison.

Holding in the hurt, Marnie realised she must forget such useless pipe dreams like marriage; for a girl like her it was too much to ever hope for. Broken, she cried herself to sleep.



Mary's wrist ached, it always did when it was going to rain. She broke it the night Charles Butler tried to kill her. Sometimes in her nightmares she could feel the heat of the flames and the madman's hands around her throat. She shuddered trying to bury the thoughts of that horrific night.

Some had it on good authority that Charles Butler had escaped to the West Coast but the Law had yet to find him and bring him to justice. And now, not only were they charging him with attempted murder but numerous other crimes as well. Victims had been found scattered about the canyon with a pick axe sized hole in the back of their skull, but new to the area and unknowns, no one claimed them as a relative so they were buried in paupers' graves in the nearest cemetery.

"There'll be rain soon, I'll wager," Mary told Grace, who was happily playing at her feet.

A sudden deluge hit the ground with ferocity and was gone just as quickly. Rain was bad for business - the track became a thick, greasy mess and kept the miners in their tents. Weather in the Canyon was extreme, blistering hot one minute, biting cold the next. Miners used every waking minute to eke gold out of the river working from daylight till dusk, but when the sun disappeared behind the mountains, they came to find comfort and companionship at her hotel.

It almost destroyed her when Charlie razed the hotel to the ground, but Jim promised to rebuild it for her, it was a solemn promise, and one he kept. The hotel boasted eight rooms, but Kitty and Grace shared one, she and Jim another, Pat had a room at the back, and there was a hut they kept especially for the priest when he was travelling through, so that only left five rooms to let. At present, there was no one staying at the hotel which meant less work, but an empty stable meant less income.

Mary loved the life, she enjoyed the men, the raw easy-going banter, but most of all she loved them spending their hard-earned winnings at her establishment. Most nights, the hotel was full of men wearing serge and moleskins, a mix of nationalities ready to slake their thirst, toasting their good fortune or cursing their bad luck. Most, were happy if they had their mates by their sides and enough coin in their pockets to imbibe. She knew how to lift a man's spirits after a day spent in freezing water by a smile, a word, or a wink or two. Yet they all knew she was not a woman to be trifled with, she commanded respect, and got it.

The patrons were surprised when Jim Healey returned from the dead. They assumed she was a widow, and she'd said nothing

to make them think otherwise. Jim never worked behind the bar, nor joined them for a drink. Rumours were rife, and she'd heard some. Folks said it was because he feared he'd be overcome by the demon drink. Word about Lake County was that the young priest had a lot to do with the restoration of their estranged marriage. And they were partly right, the priest had been instrumental in melting the bitterness she felt towards her husband, but if she were honest it was because Jim had stopped drinking, and despite everything, she loved him.

The hotel kept her busy, and that made her happy. Maybe it was just because there was a lack of drinking holes in the area, and she served good grog. It didn't matter the reason why they frequented her hotel, just as long as they did. Satisfied the Long Gully pub should enjoy its usual patronage, Mary let the curtain fall.

Grace hid amongst the folds of Mary's skirts playing peek-a-boo. Mary smiled down at her little granddaughter. The wee one was a delight, but her dark hair stuck straight up like an upended broom, and no amount of licking and spitting would make it sit. The child had a look of her father about her but Mary chose not to see it. Grace's father would never come for her – married with three legitimate children he wanted his bastard to remain a secret. She made sure he paid dearly for what he'd done to Annie and the price of silence was a monthly maintenance payment made to a solicitor's office in Dunedin. There were rumours that Annie hadn't married a man called Tom O'Callaghan, but no one dared to challenge Mary to her face.

“Come on little one, there’s work to do,” Mary said, tucking the child into her hip.

Mary was sweeping the kitchen when Kitty came through the side door, her sodden bonnet dangling limply from her wrist. Her hair was dripping wet and her skirts muddied and soaked through. A twist of red hair hanging rakishly over one eye made her look disreputable.

Mary glanced up at the clock. “You are home early,” she said, surprised.

Kitty shook the drips from her hair, took her boots off and stood in a puddle of wet stockings. Grace bravely toddled to her as fast as her pudgy, unsteady legs could go. Kitty scooped Grace into her arms and planted a wet kiss on the baby’s soft, warm cheek. Grace squirmed and giggled with delight.

Despairing, Mary put the broom aside. “Pssht, now the baby is wet as well,” she grumbled.

“She’ll dry, won’t you, love.” Kitty put Grace down, held her steady for a moment then let go. Grace fell on her napkin-cushioned bottom with a soft ploomph.

“Here, dry yourself,” Mary said chucking Kitty a towel. “You should have taken your oilskin? Do you want to catch your death?”

Voice muffled by the towel, Kitty replied, “I didn’t expect it to rain.”

Kitty went to her room to get changed and Grace crawled after her. Mary smiled, wherever Kitty was, Grace was not far behind. At fourteen there were times Kitty showed responsibility beyond her years, yet at other times she could be as flighty as a tomtit.

Mary shook her head. For the life of her, she couldn't figure out how the same ingredients went into the recipe but each child came out entirely different. Out of her five surviving children, Kitty was the youngest, and the image of herself when she was young. Now the older girls weren't there to help, Mary relied heavily on Kitty, and kept her busy with the washing, cooking, and cleaning. Idle hands were the devils playground and she wasn't going to give Kitty time to get into any mischief. Mary's heart grew heavy, if only she'd kept better watch over her children then Annie would be alive today. She shook off the ghosts and started to prepare dinner.

Kitty helped, and soon the glorious aroma of freshly baked bread and rabbit stew filled the kitchen. Hungry, Grace kept getting underfoot. Kitty was quiet. Unusually so. Something was wrong. Jim often joked that Kitty could happily talk the leg off a three-legged pot.

Using the long-handled paddle, Mary took the bread out of the oven. "You haven't said much. How was your visit?"

Kitty popped Grace into the highchair. She checked the sides of the tablecloth for evenness as if it was suddenly of great importance. "There's not a lot to tell," she replied.

Perturbed, Mary asked, "Did Meg like the gown?"

"I'm not sure," Kitty answered truthfully.

Grace impatiently banged her spoon on the highchair's wooden tray.

Kitty placed the bowls on the bench. "You can ask her yourself, she'll be here tomorrow."

"Oh?" Mary looked up sharply. "But it's not Sunday."

“Well, there you go, Ma,” Kitty grinned. “Maybe Meg is trying to be as unpredictable as the weather.”



Pat and Jim went back to the hotel, stripped off, and left their wet things to dry on the back porch. Ravenous, and wearing little more than their undergarments, Jim and Pat traipsed into the kitchen, tired but happy after a good day's pickings.

Jim kissed Grace's soft downy head in passing, and glancing over Mary's shoulder to see what was cooking, he patted his wife lightly on the bottom.

“Smells good, Mary, me love, so good in fact me nose carried me all the way home.”

Mary waved the tea-towel at him. “Get away with ye, silly old fool.”

Jim clutched his chest as if he was mortally wounded.

Mary scolded him saying, “You'll put some trousers and a clean shirt on before you'll sit at my table, James Healey,” turning to Pat, hands on hips, she said, “and that goes for you too, Patrick Healey.”

They knew better than to argue when their full names were in use so they disappeared to their respective rooms to change. Exasperated, Mary sighed, the pair of them were alike in many ways. Pat was as spindly as a spider, all arms and legs like his long-limbed father, but his hair was red where Jim's was dark. Although they hadn't been working *The Redemption* long, the trust growing between the two was heart-warming. But Pat wasn't over the loss of his sister, or his best mate Tiny, but occasionally there was a flicker of humour on his fiddle-face that

gave Mary a glimmer of hope that, in time, he'd return to his old light-hearted self.

Hands and faces washed, changed and ready for supper, the men took their places at the table. Mary dished up. They waited till she was seated before clasping hands and bowing their heads in prayer. Jim thanked the good Lord for keeping them safe from harm, and for the food they were about to eat, before cheekily adding, "and for the blessing of not only a fine-looking wife, but one who can cook so well." He winked at Mary who rewarded him with a smile.

Hunched over his bowl of stew, Pat ate like he thought someone might try and steal it from him.

Mary passed the basket of thickly buttered bread to him. "Kitty says Meg's visiting tomorrow."

Pat frowned. "Why?" he asked, his mouth full.

Jim looked at Mary, his brow furrowed. "It's not Sunday tomorrow, is it?"

"No, it's Saturday," Kitty replied, breaking off a crust, she handed it to Grace who greedily rammed it into her mouth.

Mary reached for the salt shaker. "Meg probably wants to spend as much time as she can with us now before her marriage."

"Or maybe she's running away," Kitty said softly.

Mary sharply turned her head. "What makes you say that?"

"Nothing." Kitty shrugged. "Just a feeling."

Grace let out a high-pitched squeal. Mary shovelled a spoonful of apple and custard in the child's mouth to keep her quiet.

Pat sniffed and wiped a finger under his nose. "I reckon she's wants to get away from the place. I hear Burns plans are causing

friction. I hear the business partners are like two sticks of gelignite left in the sun.”

“That’s none of your business,” Mary snapped. “You’d best keep your mouth shut and your nose out of it.”

Pat tore off a hunk of bread and wiped his bowl clean, he was silent for a moment then said, “Well then, what is Meg worried about, Ma?”

“I don’t rightly know but I’m prepared to get to the bottom of it,” Mary told him.

Jim patted Mary’s hand, “Don’t you worry your pretty little head about it, darlin’, I’ll have a wee word in Meg’s ear tomorrow, and find out what’s troubling her, all right?”

“Jim Healey, you think you are the Lord God Almighty and can fix the world and all its problems,” Mary shook her head at him but she was pleased none the less. Meg and Jim shared a special bond. She glanced up at the clock. “Quick, eat up! There’s dishes to be done.”



Life spent on the river was tough so Mary made sure the men forgot about the hardships of the day when they entered her hotel. They bet on cards, played billiards, laughed and drank to their hearts content. Some played the accordion, the fiddle or a tin whistle, and could belt out catchy tunes. Tonight, Billy Chicken was playing the squeezebox with great gusto, while his mate Little Tom clapped and tapped his hobnailed boots in time, and Sprat crowed like a rooster in what he thought was singing. Mary gave the men good grog, danced reels and jigs with them until they could dance no more.

As the clock neared midnight, Mary rang the bell and shouted, "Almost closing time boys!" There was a surge towards the bar as they ordered last-minute drinks before they were chased out into the inky night. Footsore, Mary closed up. Bolting the door, she fell against it exhausted, thinking she'd never felt happier.

Jim waited until he heard the bell and the last patron being shooed away into the night, before he appeared in the tavern. Together they straightened the chairs, did the dishes and wiped down the tables. Always mindful to keep the drink away from Jim, Mary emptied the dregs into a bucket of slops and quickly disposed of them into the pig bucket. Jim reckoned the pig was never sober. One by one, Mary trimmed the paraffin lanterns. Using a candle to light the way to their room, she carried the holder at arm's length, the spilling light made their shadows long and thin on the dark panelled walls.

"How were the takings, love?" Jim asked, following her up the hallway.

"Fair enough, it was a rare busy night," Mary replied. "I had to douse Sticky with a bucket of cold water, he was passed out under the billiard table again."

She opened the door to their bedroom. Their room was bathed in warmth, the fire glowing in the grate cast shadows that moved around the dark panelled walls like long ghostly fingers. Mary lit the bedside candles. Jim untied his heavy boots, pulled them and his woollen socks off, he wriggled his cramped toes.

"I'm looking forward to hitting the hay," he said, not bothering to undo the buttons on his shirt he tugged it off over his head.

“You and me both,” Mary agreed. “And If that blinking rooster crows at four again, so help me God, it’ll be in the pot.”

Stepping out of his trousers, Jim put them over the arm of the chair, and fell into bed. Resting his arms behind his head he sighed, a contented man. He couldn’t help marvelling at how things had changed in a short time. Last year, he slept in the stables for fear Mary might kill him with a cast iron skillet if he dared to set foot in the hotel. He wished he was cured from his need for the drink, for the pains Mary took to keep him from it bruised his heart. He knew it would take years to earn her trust again, if ever. He hoped little by little trust would come.

Mary pulled the pins from her unruly hair and it tumbled past her shoulders in a mass of springy ginger curls. He loved her hair, it crackled, like her it was fiery and wild. He watched as Mary undressed slowly in the soft yellow candlelight.

“What are you thinking?” she asked, threading her arms through her linen nightgown.

“Come here little darlin’ and I’ll show you what I’m thinking,” Jim answered, turning back the covers.

Mary climbed into bed beside him. His fingers drew slow lazy circles up and down her thighs, his touch featherlight on her milky skin.

As Mary was drifting off to sleep, she kissed him and murmured, “You’ve a persuasive way about you James Healey.”

Holding her close, Jim tucked a wayward curl behind Mary’s ear and lovingly kissed her cheek. Mary’s breathing was soon a slow steady rhythm. But Jim was restless and couldn’t sleep, worried, he kept wondering what was up with his wee Meg.



It was still dark when Marnie awoke. Most of the brothel was sleeping. Careful not to disturb her snoring customer, she lifted his heavy arm off her, and slipped out of bed. She gingerly touched her right eye, it was swollen shut and tender to the touch, but the bruising was coming out. After quietly dressing in the dark, she tiptoed downstairs. She could just make out the silhouettes of men lying, snoring, on the lavish furniture in the downstairs lounge. Believing it would be bad for business to be seen to be inhospitable, so as long as they didn't vomit on her fine furnishings Madame let them be, and didn't turf them out. However, she had no trouble getting rid of any whom didn't have any coin left in their pockets.

Thinking of the overstuffed baboon she'd rolled away this morning, Marnie sighed. He hadn't minded her looking a bit roughed up. For six long months Jack had been spouting tales of love, telling her he wanted to marry her, and take her away from all this. But he was just a boy. And, if they got away, far enough away that they wouldn't be caught, he was only starting out in his trade as a smithy, how could they survive? There was still such a shortage of women on the goldfields men didn't seem too worried by the prospect of having a whore for a wife. And, there were those who could afford to buy her outright from Madame, should she be willing to sell. Other girls had tried to escape, one had been so badly beaten that she had cocooned within herself and refused to speak. Another 'fell' off a cliff. Marnie shuddered remembering seeing the girl's broken body, the coffin was left open as a warning.

Tiptoeing across the bare floorboards she picked up her lace parasol from the mahogany coat-stand and gave Bill, who was sleeping by the door, a nudge.

“Can you open the door?” Marnie whispered.

Bill popped open one sleep encrusted eye and regarded her with suspicion. “Why? Where are you going so early?” He stretched, yawned and scratched his backside.

“Madame’s orders,” Marnie lied. “She wants something special from the bakery for the Major for breakfast.”

Bill grunted and fumbled with the keys hanging from his belt. Gathering himself to his feet he leaned against the wall for support. Unlocking the padlock, he pushed open the door. Heart skipping a beat, Marnie quickly ducked underneath his heavily muscled arm, and disappeared into the empty street. She heard the door close behind her, then holding her aching ribs, she ran.



It was getting lighter. The sun was pulling away from the earth casting a soft golden glow upon the lake causing it to sparkle like cut crystal. The town would soon be rousing itself, and if she was coming, then she was late. Jack’s stomach squirmed like a sack full of newborn kittens. Had she changed her mind? Daisy told him Marnie got a hell of a hiding for even suggesting leaving The Ladies of the Lake. That, Bill, the swine, had almost cracked one of her ribs and Marnie was forbidden to see or speak to him ever again. Daisy was sent to tell him to keep away. Devastated, Jack felt like all the colours in the world has faded to black. He ached with longing for the girl who stole his heart.

Then, two days later, Daisy popped her head around the Smithy shop door and cryptically told him, 'Little lady wants to run away. Meet her tomorrow at dawn, at the Bank of New South Wales corner.'

Jack was about to give up hope when he saw a winged shape coming out of the gloom. Wearing a hooded cloak and carrying something, a woman hurried towards him. He ran to greet her. Marnie fell into his arms. He embraced her. Wincing in pain, she let out a muffled groan. Apologizing, he released his hold and gently kissed her cheek. Her lip was split, her eye was a nasty purplish yellow. Fear bit him.

"Come quickly," Jack said, taking her hand. They hurried along the alleyway towards the smithy shop. He had to get her away from here, and fast, before they found her and took her back to the brothel. The first place they'd come looking would be his shop and if they caught her, then they'd really hurt her. To throw them off the scent he'd have to stay, and Marnie would have to disappear, far enough away that Madame wouldn't bother to try and retrieve her merchandise. The only place he could think to hide Marnie was the Welcome Home. He couldn't leave Queenstown, not yet, or it would look too suspicious. No, there was nothing else for it, he'd have to take Marnie to Moonlight, and ask Dan to deliver her to Ma. Then, once the dust settled, he'd travel up to Long Gully and make her his wife.

The building's walls were streaked with soot. The smithy shop smelt like damp dirt, horse and musty leather. Tools were arranged neatly on hooks, and jars sat in rows on the rough sawn timber shelves. Ropes were coiled like snakes on the floor and

harnesses hung from the walls. A water trough stood beside the square stone well in the corner, where a fire burned, a large bin of coal beside it, with a long-handled shovel at the ready.

Watching Jack saddle Mr Bennett's horse, Pepper, Marnie clutched her parasol tightly like a weapon. Pepper stood patiently as Jack buckled the saddle around his girth.

Marnie's ribs ached. She closed her eyes trying to shut out the pain. "Where are we going?" she whispered from the gloom. The horse's ears twitched as if he was curious to know.

Jack patted Pepper's neck. "To my brother Dan's. He'll take you to Ma's and I'll come get you as soon as I can."

"What?" Marnie cried, stepping out of the shadows. "You can't leave me! I ran away to be with you!"

Jack turned away, unable to bear the horrified look on Marnie's battered face. "If I leave now, they are sure to come looking at one of my relatives."

"But..." she objected.

"I need to stay here a little longer, and earn enough to get us safely away from here."

Marnie felt weak. Had she made a terrible mistake? Should she try and return to the brothel now, before it was too late? "I... don't want..." she gasped, struggling to find the words. "I want to be with you."

"You will be. Forget the notion of trying to ride side-saddle, you'll need both legs to stay seated," he instructed. "Foot."

Afraid, Marnie didn't know what to do. If she returned to the brothel she might end up down some abandoned mine shaft somewhere. No, she couldn't go back, but she didn't want to go

to Mary Healey's hotel either, she just wanted to run away with Jack, and be far enough away from her old life, in a place where no one knew anything about her. Jack might be young, and poor, but he was earnest, and he loved her. Desperate, she glanced nervously at the end of a coil of rope dangling from the rafters. She'd heard things about Mary Healey and none of them kind.

"But I need you," she insisted, clinging to him.

Kissing her softly, Jack said, "It won't be for long, I promise. It's for the best."

"Your mother will hate me!"

"She will not be best pleased," he admitted. "But darlin' you can charm a rattlesnake so I'm sure you'll have my Ma eating out of your hand soon enough. Besides, Da has a knack with Ma. He'll talk her round, you'll see. You'll love my little sister Kitty, she'll talk your ear off but she's lovely. I promise to come as soon as I can."

Marnie was close to tears.

"Foot."

She grunted as she placed her foot in the stirrup and hoisted herself onto the horse's back.

"I don't think you'll need the parasol," he said, amused.

"I might," Marnie replied indignantly. For some strange reason, she felt she must have something, that was hers, and hers alone.

Shaking his head, Jack rolled the parasol inside a blanket and secured it to the back of Pepper's saddle. Regardless if she would need it or not, they couldn't leave it behind, it would be evidence Marnie had been there. Leading the horse out of the smithy shop, he bolted and padlocked the large wooden doors behind them.

Jack climbed onto the stone wall, mounted the horse, settling himself behind Marnie. Arm about her waist, he gave Pepper a sharp nudge in the flanks and urged the horse on. Marnie's head bumped solidly against Jack's chest as Pepper trotted along the lane. Jack was relieved to have Marnie safe in his arms but knew it was imperative to get her away from danger. They must make for Moonlight.

They were lucky, only the bakery shop lanterns were burning brightly, the rest of the town still was blanketed in sleep. The ride to Moonlight was not a long one but there weren't any proper roads, just tracks. Their heads struggling with fears, they rode in silence. Pepper was a faithful sure-footed workhorse not used to been ridden at pace, and the way was rough in places. Jack urged the tired horse on. The ground was narrow and uneven, Matagouri bushes reached out long thorny fingers trying to claw them as they passed. Marnie's ribs pained her, but apart from a grunt of discomfort now and then, she didn't complain.

Jack reined up beside a stone hut set a little way back from the river. There was a wooden sign tacked on the hut's door.

"What's the sign say?" Marnie whispered.

'Stone Hall.' Jack chuckled.

A dog barked, and Marnie tensed. Pepper snorted and pawed the ground.

"It's all right," Jack said, sensing her fear, "it's just Tu." He dismounted and gave Pepper a reassuring pat before helping Marnie down. He held her in his arms for moment as if trying to impart courage.

The dog kept barking, and they could hear stirrings inside the hut. Someone shouted something in a native tongue. Surprised, Marnie glanced at Jack, her eyes wide with fright.

“That’s Maori Harry, you’ll like him,” Jack told her. He tethered Pepper to the hitching post where two other horses stood, their tails swishing. They acknowledged the newcomer with a nudge. Pepper pushed between them and drank greedily from the water trough.

There was a ruckus coming from inside the hut. Someone swore. Marnie hid behind Jack as he knocked.

The door opened, and a black and white collie flew at them barking furiously. Terrified, Marnie froze. Barring his sharp pointed teeth, ears lowered, Tu crouched and growled. Jack gave Tu his hand to sniff.

“Come!” Dan commanded. The sheepdog obeyed and half crouched beside Dan, still eyeing the intruders warily as if daring them to make a false move.

“Jack!” Dan stepped outside. “What are you doing here?” Then he caught sight of Marnie. “What’s she doing here?”

“She’s with me,” Jack told him, immediately on the defence.

A woman in their midst was a novelty for the diggers. Dressed, only in their long-johns, Harry and Yankee appeared in the hut doorway. Marnie couldn’t help staring at the swirling tattoos covering Harry’s face. Tall and powerfully built with long black hair and coal black eyes, Harry was a formidable sight. Marnie stuck to Jack like she were pinned to his side. Maori Harry nodded, his dark eyes assessing Marnie’s bruised face. Just as she

was fascinated by his appearance, he was equally intrigued by hers.

Eager to be on the road, Jack was impatient. "Can we come in?" he said shortly.

"Sorry," Dan apologized, waving Harry and Yankee aside. "Yankee, put the billy on mate."

Yankee took Jack by the hand and gave it a good shake. "Good to see you again mate," he paused, "and nice to meet you...er...?"

"Marnie," she replied, managing a timid smile. Feeling self-conscious, Marnie realized she must look a mess with her smeared makeup, black eye and thick lip.

Yankee chucked a pair of moleskins and a serge shirt to Harry, which he reluctantly put on.

"I'm Yankee, and this here is Harry, and his dog Tu," Yankee said formally. He hopped about trying to put his trousers on. "Can't make tea for a lady in nothing but my underwear, can I?"

Hardly a lady, thought Dan, disgusted. He knew what she was. He had seen Marnie soliciting outside *The Ladies of the Lake*.

Yankee buttoned his fly and tied his red sash about his waist. "Am I fit for entertaining?" he asked, barefoot and grinning.

"The billy," Dan reminded.

"Hold ya bloomin' horses," Yankee grumbled. "We only got four mugs but don't worry mate, I'll go without." Yankee swung the billy over the open fire and stoked life into the embers. He reached up and got down four battered tin mugs off the rough sawn shelf. "Dan seems to have misplaced his manners, must have left them in his cot this morning."

In no mood for fooling, Dan glowered.

Marnie surveyed the dingy hut. There was a clay pipe which acted as the chimney, two tea chests served as tables or chairs. A sack cot in one corner and a ledge that acted as a bed in the other, and on the floor lay a flax mat and a grey woollen blanket. The hut was rudimentary but seemed to suit the men's purposes well enough. Dan motioned for Marnie and Jack to take a seat on the upturned crates while he sat on the stone ledge, his hands pressed on his thighs. Tail wagging, Tu sniffed Jack first, then Marnie. Afraid, Marnie pulled her hand away.

"He won't bite," Harry told her. Grinning, he added, "but I might."

The look of sheer horror on Marnie's face made Harry laugh.

"He's joking," Jack told her. He was feeling agitated, aware time was getting on and he must return before Bennett arrived at the forge.

After a couple of sniffs, Tu decided Marnie was more friend than foe, and surprised her by lying down and resting his head on her feet.

"So, what brings you to Moonlight?" Dan asked.

"Utu?" Harry frowned across at Yankee.

"Huh? What's that mean?" Jack asked.

"Revenge or something like avenge," Yankee interpreted. "Harry wants to know if you want us to deal to whoever beat Marnie," he explained.

"Oh, no. Thank you, though. I just need to get her to safety." Jack got straight to the point. "I need your help, Dan. I need you to take Marnie up to Ma's. I can't go myself but I'll be up there soon as I can. Take her for me, please?"

Dan frowned at Marnie. "Why? Has she run away?"

"Yes," Jack replied, reaching for Marnie's hand, "with me." He continued to speak plainly, "As soon as we can we are going to wed, but first I need to throw them off the scent. I reckon they will come to the smithy looking for Marnie. They will expect to find her there, but she'll be safe with Ma, and they won't know to look that far."

Dan looked at Jack like he was deranged, he blurted, "Are you mad? You want me to take her up to Ma's?" He shook his head. "She'd be safer back where she came from."

Marnie's fear was making her feel sick to her stomach. If they found her, they would kill her.

Yankee interrupted. "We've no cow so you'll have to take it black. Sugar?" he asked digging a spoon in a tin.

"Two please," Marnie replied, grateful for the diversion. Yankee added two heaped spoons of sugar to the tea and gave it a stir.

"Thank you," she said, taking the cup from his hand.

Jack indicated black was fine while Harry got his own, which smelt strongly of liquor. He sat cross-legged on the hard-packed dirt floor staring up at Marnie. Marnie dropped her gaze. Yankee handed Dan the remaining mug which Dan accepted with a nod of thanks.

A weighty silence fell. Yankee leaned against the far wall, smoking his pipe. "I'll take her up," he offered.

Dan shot Yankee a dark look then turned his attention to Jack. "You think Ma will..."

Jack interrupted, "I know she won't approve but she'll come around, eventually. Can you take Marnie for me, yes or no?" He couldn't hide the desperation in his voice. He must get back if he didn't return soon Mr Bennett might report his horse stolen.

"I said I'll take her," Yankee repeated.

"The hell you will," Dan snapped. "If anyone's going, it'll be me."

"Then you'll do it?" Jack breathed a sigh of relief.

"Aye, I must be as mad as you are, you silly young cockerel," Dan replied. Rubbing his hand across his stubbly chin he took a fortifying sip of tea, God help them all.

They clustered outside and watched as Jack prepared to leave. He pressed his rosary beads into Marnie's hand, "Here, these will keep you safe," he told her kissing her. Then he clambered up on Pepper and rode away. With a sinking heart Marnie watched him disappear. Had he deserted her? Could she trust him? Or anyone? The sun was struggling to penetrate the low-lying clouds that shrouded the mountains in a thick mist, and she was grateful for the warmth of her fur-lined cloak. She tucked the rosary beads away in her cloak pocket and sat despondently on a log by the hut door, waiting. She felt like crying but knew she must stay strong, even if it was only to gain the men's respect. Tu sat beside her, his head on resting on her feet, his sorrowful eyes looking up at her. She reached down and patted the collie's head.

Dan packed his saddle bags and saddled his horse. Marnie decided the brothers weren't alike in looks. Dan's hair was dark and wavy and he had a stubbly beard that seemed reluctant to grow whereas Jack was lean, lanky, clean shaven, tall and red-

haired. She guessed Dan was only a couple of years older than herself.

Dan shook his head as he secured Marnie's lace parasol inside the saddle blanket so it wouldn't be in the way. Where she was going she wasn't going to need a lace parasol but a strong pair of hands. He resented having to be the one to take Marnie to Long Gully but there was no other way around it. He couldn't let Yankee go and have his heart broken all over again, and it wasn't right to involve Harry in his family's messy affairs. It was ironic that he was charged with the responsibility of taking this woman to his mother's hotel when he despised women like her. He thought any man seduced by such women were fools. His brother, Pat, consorted with harlots and charlatans and now here was his youngest brother planning to marry one! She could probably hide her background with some respectable clothing but her swinging hips gave her trade away. Jack was clearly besotted with the girl, but she was hardly someone he could take home to mother. God in Heaven, what was the young fool thinking?

Dan gave Marnie a leg up on Goldie, and once she was settled, he mounted and gave his partners a couple of last minute instructions before they moved off.

Yankee called after them, "You're going to miss a fine feed of Maori hen tonight boyo."

"You can have my share," Dan replied. He grinned. "I'll think of you when I'm enjoying a helping or two of Ma's Irish stew."

"You're all heart." Yankee clutched his chest as if pained.

Harry said to Marnie, "Remember if you need..." he smacked his fist into his palm.

“Thank you, I’ll remember Harry,” she nodded.

Yankee waved. “Take care, Marnie.”

Mary inclined her head. “Thank you. Bye, Yankee. Bye, Harry.”

The men waved and Tu barked a farewell.

Dan held the reins in one hand, kept one arm about Marnie’s waist and used his legs to guide the horse.

Marnie was acutely aware of being an unwanted burden. She saw Dan’s displeasure in the tautness of his body, the way the veins in his neck stood out, and his jaw clenched. She didn’t dare speak for fear of being rebuffed. She wished Yankee had been the one to take her to the hotel, he was nice.

As if reading her thoughts Dan broke the uncomfortable silence. “I couldn’t let Yankee take you.”

“Why?”

Dan sighed. “Because he’s heartbroken, that’s why. My sister accepted another’s proposal. And he wants any excuse to see her again to try and convince her she’s making a mistake. But when my sister has made up her mind she’s harder to move than a mountain. She’ll only hurt him some more, and then Harry and I will be the ones who to have to pick up the pieces. He’s been moping for months now, Harry and I can’t bear it any longer, it’s like living with a corpse who won’t have the good grace to lay down and stay buried.”

Marnie realized she knew very little about Jack’s family. She’d heard tales of Mary Healey, and she knew Pat, for he was a frequenter of the brothel, but she knew nothing of the rest of the family Except Annie, she’d met Annie once.

“Who is your sister marrying?”

“Meg’s to wed, Mr William Burns, next month. Maybe then Yankee will stop mooning around like a lovesick cow and get on with the business of prospecting. Mind you, he’s bought a sizeable chunk of land with his share of the gold so perhaps he’ll go farm that. I hope he don’t, for all my grumbling about him, he’s a good mate, and I’d miss him.”

“That must mean you are as wealthy as he,” Marnie noted. There was a cold silence. Marnie realised he thought her a gold digger ready to pluck any purse, it saddened her that just because she was a whore, he thought she was also a thief.

Searching for something to say, she said, “Yankee is a fine-looking man, he won’t have trouble finding someone.”

“It’s just as well you’re spoken for then, isn’t it,” Dan replied, his tone cutting.

They fell silent again. Whatever she said would be wrong. It was best to say nothing. Marnie was worried, she had no idea what to expect, and she was scared. Had she jumped from the frying pan into the fire? Since the age of ten all she’d known was the brothel and she didn’t know what to expect outside its four walls. She’d heard stories about Mary Healey and none of them had been kind. Even her sons were afraid of her. Marnie swallowed. This wasn’t how she thought things would be but it was too late now, she couldn’t go back. God no, she would never go back.

Chapter 3

Dead Man

Jack made it back to the forge before Mr Bennett roused himself for the day. Only the stable hand in the livery next door knew that Pepper had been ridden hard, but he promised not to mention it when sixpence crossed his palm. It was dark and smoky in the forge. Jack lit the kerosene lantern and hung it from the rafters. Stripping off his jacket, he rolled up his sleeves and donned his leather apron. He pumped the massive bellows to stoke life back into the embers, and once the fire was roaring, he heated horseshoes until they were glowing. He hammered them into shape on the large anvil, but his mind was fixed on Marnie.

He had been besotted with her from the first day they met. It was the day after his accident when the tree fell the wrong way and he wasn't able to escape in time. It was a blessing. He hated life at the timber mill. The sex starved men saw him as young and girlish and ripe for the picking. He was afraid to turn in to his cot each night. He shuddered at the dark memories, he couldn't forget how they violated him. He'd wondered after being sodomised if he would be ever able to have natural relations with a woman. He thought he was damaged beyond repair.

It was Pat who collected him from the infirmary, and having had enjoyed some windfall, paid for their stay at the brothel until he was well enough to travel up to the hotel. Like an angel Marnie watched over him, she made him feel whole. She made him feel like a man, not a boy, and he loved her for it. She would be safe at Long Gully. His Ma might strike the fear of God into the hearts of

men but she was a kindly soul underneath, even if you had to dig deep to find it.

Mr Bennett grunted, 'Mornin',' to Jack, and set to work repairing a broken wagon wheel. Bennett was a reserved man and apart from his bulbous nose he had a bland round face and careworn eyes. Bennett kept mostly to himself, and Jack thought it wise to keep his own counsel. His back to the doors, Jack didn't see Bill coming until he barged past, nearly knocking Bennett over.

Grabbing Jack by the collar, Bill lifted Jack off his feet, and slammed him hard against the wall. Stretched on the tip of his toes, Jack struggled for breath as Bill's fingers squeezed his wind pipe. Jack desperately tried to pry Bill's hands off but he had an iron grip. Bill pulled his knotted fist back, ready. Madame bustled in, in a flurry of lace and emerald silk skirts and demanded to know where Marnie was hiding.

"What's the meaning of this?" Mr Bennett snapped, coming to Jack's rescue. "For God's sake put the lad down he can't breathe," he cried.

Ignoring Bennett, Bill shook Jack again, banging his head against the bricks. "You heard the lady, where you hidden her?" he growled.

Jack struggled, trying to claw Bill's fingers from his neck. Turning blue, he felt like he was about to pass out.

Madame signalled Bill to lower Jack, "He can't tell you if he can't breathe," she said, practically.

Bill let go and Jack fell gasping to the flagstone floor.

“What the hell is going on?” Bennett demanded, his dander up and his blood pressure boiling, his face went as red as the tip of his bulbous nose.

The Madame gave the blacksmith an austere glare. Pointing her jewelled finger at Jack, she declared, “He’s got one of my best girls.” Bennett didn’t react so Madame continued, “Marnie is missing.” Sweetening her tone, she said, “Perhaps you have seen her?”

Outraged, Bennett said, “How dare you come in here spouting ridiculous accusations,” he blustered. “The lad’s been with me the whole time. If you don’t leave, I’ll call the constable and have you arrested.”

Madame turned her attention back to Jack, “I’m warning you,” she said her voice hard and cold, “If I find you’re hiding her...” she bent down, got up close, close enough for him to smell she’d been eating onions, “I’ll have you flogged. I’ll have the meat stripped from your bones, boy. Do you understand?”

Labouring for breath, Jack wheezed.

“Out!” Bennett yelled, his anger erupting. When neither intruder made a move, Bennett walked over to the well of fire and using the long-handled tongs picked up a red-hot horseshoe from amongst the embers. Jabbing the horseshoe at them, he cried, “Now!”

Bill stood his ground, his arms folded across his massive chest as if daring Bennett to brand him.

“Come on, Bill,” the Madame said tugging on Bill’s heavily muscled arm. “This is not over,” she warned Jack. “I want Marnie, and if you value your scrawny neck you’ll return her.”

Chest heaving with indignation, Bennett chased them out the door with the firebrand. When they were gone Bennett threw the horseshoe aside, it clanged as it hit the long-handled shovel resting in the corner.

Jack took in great thirsty gulps of air as he struggled to his feet.

“Well,” Bennett said steadying the lad. “Do you want to tell me what that was all about then?”

Jack shook his head trying to clear it. Through the large open wooden doors Jack could see Bill on other side of the road, waiting for him.

Bennett kept his voice low. “You can’t stay here,” he warned. “They’re not going to stop until they find her.”

Jack’s heart sank, he had hoped to earn more to be able to give Marnie a better start in their new life together.

“I don’t want no trouble, son,” Bennett said, his weathered face grave. “I don’t want those ruffians burning my shop down, and they are likely to if they don’t get what they want.”

Jack couldn’t argue because he believed it to be the truth. Madame and her thug weren’t going to let him be. It was wrong of him to drag Bennett into this mess. Bennett may be a drunk, but he’d given Jack a chance, taken him in when he needed work, let him live in a hut at the back of his cottage. Jack appreciated the chance he’d been given, such kindness shouldn’t be repaid with violence.

“If you’ll - give me - my wages - I’ll go, and not cause you more trouble,” Jack wheezed.

Bennett put a hand on the young man's shoulder, "I'll miss you lad, you've been a fine apprentice but you understand, don't you?"

Jack nodded, his heart heavy with despair.

"I'll go to the bank you best wait till the cover of dark before leaving. Go out the back way then run like the blazes boy, and make sure that bally black-hearted bastard doesn't catch you." Bennett went out the large red wooden doors. "Back soon," he called over his shoulder, loud enough for Bill to hear.

Jack slumped down on the floor and put his head in his hands. If he made for the canyon in the dark, he'd have to stop and sleep rough in the best grassy area he could find and wait for daylight, he wouldn't want to risk walking off a ledge in the dark, or falling into the river and drowning. What he could take. Not much, his hat, coat, pocketknife and wallet.

But instead of money, Bennett came back with food. Handing Jack a bacon dripping sandwich, he told him to eat.

Jack looked at it doubtfully. "I don't think I can. I think he crushed my windpipe."

"Save it for a bit, you'll be fine," Bennett patted Jack's shoulder. He sat down on a barrel and stroked a hand through his straggly whiskers, "Ye know I've been thinking you mustn't leave too soon or they'll know you're guilty. Wait a while. Sleep here if you must. We got to come up with a better plan son or they'll skin your sorry carcass alive."

"That sounds like good advice to me," Jack agreed wholeheartedly. The last thing he wanted was to lead them straight to Marnie.

Bennett shook his head. "By God, I hope this girl is worth the trouble she's caused you lad," he said, taking a bite of sandwich.

Hand on heart, Jack said, "She is to me."



Yankee knocked, and waited.

A young woman opened the door a crack. "Yes?"

Surprised, Yankee removed his hat. "Hello ma'am. Is the priest in?"

"No, I'm afraid he's not," she apologized. "He's gone to visit his flock up at Macetown. I don't expect him back for a couple of days."

Disappointed, Yankee wrung his hat in his hands.

She opened the door a foot wider. "Have you travelled far? Would you like a cup of tea?"

Yankee ducked his head. "Ah...thank you kindly that would be grand."

"Niamh Boyle, the good father's new housekeeper," she told him.

"Yankee Brown," he said with a slow smile. "I take it the previous one got married?"

"How did you guess?" she flashed him a smile.

Opening the door wide she ushered him inside.

Petite, with her sandy hair pulled back in a bun, she wore a white apron over a simple grey day dress but she was a girl with keen blue eyes and a ready smile. Father Whooley's lodgings were small and cramped. Books filled the bookshelves of a small, simply furnished cottage.

While Niamh busied herself in the kitchen, Yankee took it upon himself to sit in the priest's chair. He stared out the latticed window trying to gather his wits. He'd spoken to Father Whooley several times about the ache in his heart that would not shift. He described to the Father as like having a stone in your boot that you can't get rid of. And how he thought he was going cockaloo since he couldn't stop thinking about Meg. He couldn't share his feelings with his best mate, since Dan was duty bound to side with his sister. Harry joked, that he should just throw Meg over his shoulder and carry her away, even that suggestion didn't provoke a smile.

But it helped to unburden his soul to the priest. Father Whooley listened patiently, and told him that the pain would ease in time, assuring him when he met another he would be free of his feelings for Meg. He desperately wanted to believe that. Yankee smiled to himself, it was fortunate that the priest wasn't at home only his housekeeper was, a pleasant girl she was, and handsome enough too. Perhaps, Father Whooley was right. Perhaps this was just the kind of diversion he needed to keep himself sane. Niamh came into the living room carrying a tray, she lowered the tray so he could take his cup and saucer.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am, you're a true Christian." Yankee gave her a mischievous smile. He put the cup down on the side table.

"Milk? Sugar?" Niamh asked, stooping over the tray and looking expectantly up at him through her lashes.

"No thank you, but I fancy one of those delicious looking buns," he said, helping himself to a side plate and three buns.

“Healthy appetite,” she noted with a smile. Placing the tray on a side table she sat on the opposite chair, teacup and saucer poised on her lap. “Baked them fresh this morning,” she told him proudly. “There’s not a lot to do when Father Whooley is away but I like to keep the place neat and tidy, and have the tins full for his return.”

“I’m sure he appreciates you,” Yankee said, taking a bite. “Mmm, mighty good ma’am, they’re mighty good buns.”

“It’s Miss,” she corrected, her blue eyes meeting his over the rim of her cup. “Thank you erm...Mr...?”

“Yankee Brown at your service ma’am. Master. I have to admit I’m rather pleased Father Whooley is not at home,” he confessed. “Are you new to the area?”

Grinning, Niamh answered, “I arrived last week and I rather think I’m going to like it.”



Meg arrived early Saturday morning with a basket on her arm.

“Hello Ma, gifts from the Asterlys for you.” She pecked her mother’s cheek and deposited the basket on the bench.

Mary lifted the tea-towel, and was pleased to find a batch of scones, jar of jam and pot of cream.

“Thank Catherine for me, won’t you?” Mary had never expected to like the woman but Catherine Asterly showed a quiet determination and strength of character that matched Mary’s own. Besides, with such a lack of women in the area, it was nice to have at least one friend.

Fidgety, Meg wandered about the room picking things up and setting them down again.

“It’s nice to see you a day early, I wasn’t expecting you until Sunday.”

“I told Kitty I was, didn’t she tell you?” Meg asked, surprised. She glanced up the hall. “Where is Kitty?”

Mary rolled her eyes. “Over at Greengate again. She’s making a right nuisance of herself over there. Kitty takes Grace with her, and Granny spoils Grace while Kitty sews. Sprat bought Granny a treadle machine, he reckons it softens the sound of her voice. He’s always said his Ma has a crow like a rooster.” Mary chuckled. “That’s the pot calling the kettle black, you should hear Sprat’s singing voice.”

A small smile tugged at the corners of Meg’s mouth as ran her finger along the sideboard.

Mary said, “Are you checking for dust? Don’t think I’m getting soft in my old age, I make Kitty do all her chores before she goes. You should see her, she flies around here like the devil is chasing her.”

“Sorry, Ma.” Meg took her hand away. “I had hoped to see Grace. Kitty tells me she’s walking.”

“Don’t be upset now, you’ll see the wee one soon enough. She gabbles away nonstop, pulls herself up on everything, and waddles like a duck. And she’s too quick - I have to watch her like a hawk around the fireplaces.”

Meg wrapped her arms protectively about herself as if she was holding something in.

Mary lifted a plate down from the sideboard, she wondered whether to ask Meg outright what was troubling her, or to wait. Mary decided best to wait.

Finally, Meg said, "I think I may have offended Kitty."

Mary glanced up. "Oh? How's that then?"

Meg sighed. "I think she may have expected me to show more enthusiasm."

Mary nodded sagely. "I can see how that would upset her you know how she likes a fuss."

Changing the subject, Meg said, "Da and the boys have done a fine job of building the new kitchen, haven't they?"

"Aye, that they have," Mary agreed. She put a dollop of jam and cream on the scones.

Meg crossed the floor and peeked out the lace curtain. "Is Da about?"

"I don't rightly know," Mary replied. "He could be up at the claim." She cocked her head to one side. "But then again, I could be wrong. Kitty told us you were coming so he probably stayed close to home, like as not he'll be mucking out the stables. Have a look for him if you like, but I tell you any hint of food and he appears out of the woodwork like magic. The man has the nose of a fox. I don't know where he puts it all. It's not right he can eat all that tucker and stay as thin as the eye of a needle."

Meg sat on the kitchen stool, and dropped her head in her hands. "I need to talk to you, Ma."

Mary took a deep breath, braced herself and took a seat. Surely not again. "Are you in trouble?"

Meg's head jerked up and her brown eyes opened wide. "No!"

Mary sagged with relief. Reaching over, she patted Meg's hand. "Then for goodness' sakes girl, what's troubling you? A tooth doctor would have an easier time extracting the problem."

Meg glanced down at the engagement ring on her finger. The metal was burning her flesh. "I think...I think I may have made a mistake," she stammered.

Mary frowned. "What kind of mistake?"

"Oh, Ma," Meg cried, "I'm not sure that I should have accepted Williams' proposal."

Mary waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, darlin' it's just your nerves talking. I don't know what you've been told or what you believe will happen on your wedding night, but William will take good care of you. I don't expect you are blind ignorant as you've seen animals mating after all, but it's different with men and women in that ..."

Meg held up her hand to silence her mother but unfazed Mary continued, "And if you're anything like me, you'll enjoy..."

"Ma stop!" Meg began to pace. "You don't understand. I like William well enough, he's a good man but..." She threw up her hands in despair. "Oh Ma, I'm confused."

"Love?" Mary snorted. "Love is an action, not a feeling." Suspicion skittered across Mary's mind. "Has Yankee Brown been to see you?"

Meg nodded miserably.

Mary was not one for mincing words. "You are troubled because your heart is not committed."

"I am committed," argued Meg. "I am engaged to William."

Mary bit into light buttery scone and savoured the sweetness of the blackberry jam.

She swallowed. "Trouble is your heart and your head are at war with each other. Your heart tells you one thing and your head another." She licked the jam off her fingertips.

"I don't know what to do, Ma!" Meg wailed. "Tell me what to do," she implored.

Mary knew her daughter well enough to know if she advised one thing, Meg would do the opposite, besides, she didn't want to take the blame. "That's for you to decide."

Meg sighed. "Yankee's told me he's going to wed."

Mary lifted a cynical eyebrow. "And is he?"

"I guess so," Meg shrugged. "Why would he tell me otherwise?"

Mary placed her hand on Meg's shoulder. "I'm sure Dan would have said something if that were the case."

Puzzled, Meg frowned. "Do you really think so?"

Mary nodded. "Yankee's only trying to hurt you like you did him. It is as plain as the nose on your face." Mary looked her daughter dead in the eye, "You need to decide – they are both good men."

Meg frowned. "But Yankee didn't ask me to marry him."

"He would have, if you hadn't accepted William's proposal, now wouldn't he?"

Mary put the kettle on to boil. Jim's familiar footsteps could be heard traipsing up the side steps. The door opened.

"Meg me wee darlin'," Jim cried. Flinging his arms wide he enveloped his daughter in a bear hug and swung her around the kitchen.

Meg gave him a wobbly smile as he set her down. "Da."

“It’s grand to see you darlin’.” He pinched her cheek. “I hope your wee sister told you we miss you something fierce. Of course, she did, that’s why you’re visiting us earlier than usual. Are you staying the night?”

Meg shook her head.

He wagged his finger. “I don’t want you there on Sunday’s listening to Asterly’s sermons, you might get strange protestant notions in your head.” He tweaked her nose. “You belong to the one true religion, remember that.”

Meg grinned, her Da was irrepressible at times. She batted his arm lightly. “Oh, get away with you, Da. You know I’m true.”

Spying the scones, Jim seated himself at the table, and cocked an expectant eyebrow at Mary.

“Fancy that, you’re just in time for a cuppa,” Mary told him with a wry grin.

“Ah splendid, I could drink the pot dry,” he laughed.

Mary winced. There was a time he would have drunk the pub dry. The fear he might relapse was always there, just under the surface.

Meg joined her father at the dining table. Jim had finished two scones before Meg had even finished her first lick of cream. Mary filled Meg in with the local gossip then Meg told them about what she’d read was happening in America. Then they talked about the land wars in the North Island and how happy they were that they had settled in the South. Meg told her parents what was happening at Stony Creek, Pleasant Creek, Asterly Terrace and beyond. She finished up by telling them how well the school at Skippers was doing. The Asterlys had agreed to allow their

daughters attend if the girls had extra tuition at home over and above the normal curriculum. The school roll was now up to twenty-one, eight of the children belonging to one family, most were girls as the older boys were required to work. Meg told them that one poor boy would walk for miles barefoot on an empty stomach, and arrive with nothing but a rabbit leg to eat, his only meal for the day, which he'd have to cook over the school house's pot belly stove.

"Poor little beggar," Jim sorrowfully shook his head.

Mary sighed. "We should count our blessings."

"I pop an apple or some bread in his hand now and then," Meg told them.

"That's good," Jim approved, patting his daughter's hand.

"Yes," Mary agreed. "Someone needs to show some kindness to the poor little chap, and I'm glad it's you."

"That's great news about the school darlin' but you must have forgotten to tell your face. What's wrong girl?" Jim asked. "You're as serious as the grave."

Mary pressed down on Jim's foot.

He frowned at her. "What? Am I not allowed to ask?"

"Yankee's been visiting," Mary told him.

"Oh." Unsure what to say, Jim picked up a scone and took a bite, chewing it thoughtfully. He opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and shut it again.

"I'm fine Da, really. Just a little unsettled is all. It's like Yankee's trying to show what a big man he is now he's a runholder."

"Aye, well they say a woman spurned is a terrible thing to behold, but I don't think Yankee Brown took being rejected too

well either. And he's probably trying to make ye feel remorseful. But you're happy enough, aren't yer?" Jim asked, his face creasing with concern.

Suddenly defensive, Meg said, "Of course I am. I love William." Not meeting her father's eye she brushed the crumbs from the table onto her plate.

"Well, that's as it should be," Jim said, relieved. Her mother looked sceptical.

The teapot bobbed mid-air. "Another cup?" Mary asked.

"No thanks Ma." The chair scraped as Meg rose. "I must to be going. Give my love to Pat, Kitty, and Grace, won't you. It's a shame I missed them. Please tell Kitty I adore my gown."

Mary gave Meg a reproving look. "That's something you should tell her yourself."

Chastened, Meg hung her head. "Yes Ma, I will," she promised.

Jim volunteered to walk Meg back part of the way but she declined his offer saying,

"No, Da, you stay put. As much as I love you, I need a bit of peace and quiet, and I doubt you'll give me that. If you tag along you will fill the air with your tall-tales and I won't be able to hear myself think," she teased.

"Aye, well you're right there," Mary agreed. "He natters away like an old woman most days, makes me wish I was born deaf."

Jim pretended to be wounded, but his lopsided grin betrayed him. They went outside to say goodbye.

"All right me darlin' far be it from me to argue, or wear out your ears, have it your way, but for goodness sake girl, try and look a tad happier or you'll scare the birds."

“With all the blasting going on do you really think the birds would be scared of the likes of me, Da?” Meg set off up the track.

“Clever girl, isn’t she?” Jim smiled at Mary.

“Yes,” Mary agreed. “Lucky she takes after me. You are as green as your cabbage looking.”

Peeved, Jim said, “I’ll be splitting kindling if you want me.” And headed to the wood pile.



Meg walked up the track with the basket slung over the crook of her arm. She knew her mother meant well and was trying to comfort her, but she didn’t want her mother to explain the facts of life. She had no idea what to expect, or what William expected of her, but the very thought made her feel ill.

Meg sighed. She didn’t understand herself. If she truly loved William as much as she said she did, then why did the news that Yankee was going to wed upset her? She loved teaching. It made her happy but after they were married, William wanted her to stay home and raise their children. And hadn’t that been what she’d been trying to avoid all along? And what if William suddenly decided they would leave the canyon? She loved it here in this scarred and barren land.

Meg stopped to rest at the fork in the trail. When Kitty left yesterday she was sour as a lemon, but occupied with her own troubles Meg couldn’t be bothered to ask. When Kitty was upset she would go quiet. Coming from a hot-headed Irish family, Kitty’s austere silence was a far worse punishment for them than any angry outburst. Meg resolved that when she next saw Kitty she

would tell her how much she adored the lovely gown. That ought to cheer Kitty up.

Now, how best to get herself out of her own doldrums? This dark mood was all Yankee Brown's fault. If she hadn't seen him she would have been perfectly happy. Of course, she was doing the right thing marrying William. Lady Asterly and Ma were right; it was just nerves making her skittish.



Reaching the turn off, Dan and Marnie began the ascent. The long silences stretched out unbearably.

Searching for something to say, Marnie remarked, "Your hut is named Stone Hall," and waited for Dan to respond.

Dan snorted. "That's Yankee's sense of humour for you. When we finished building it, Yankee said it was stronger than the rock of Christ and fit for gentry, so he christened it Stone Hall."

"Tell me about your family," Marnie said, hoping he would alleviate some of her fears.

"Aye well, I think you'll know Pat."

Yes, she knew Pat. "Yes, I do."

"He's living at the hotel now, and working The Redemption with Da."

"Pat's there?" she squeaked.

"Aye," Dan grunted. He and Pat didn't get on. Dan didn't approve of his brother's loose morals, and he despised the way Pat lived life as if it was one big, drunken party. After Annie's death they reached a begrudging acceptance of one another, and truth be told, Pat earned Dan's respect on the night of the Big Flood.

That night, Pat's bravery had not gone unnoticed. *The Witness*, *The Observer* and the *Wakatip Mail* were full of accounts trumpeting Pat's heroic deeds. Pat risked his scrawny neck to rescue men that were trapped buried alive under mudslides and debris. Seeing some swept away by the ferocious powerful current, Pat waded out, and encouraged others to form a human chain, which bore the men safely back to the banks of the river. He deserved a medal for such selfless bravery, not that he got one.

"Then there's Da," Dan continued. "We lost him for nigh on two years, and just when we thought him gone for good, he returned from the dead like Jesus Christ himself."

"Where was he?" Marnie chanced to ask.

"Wandering," Dan answered, deliberately vague.

Goldie shied as a rabbit shot across the track. Prancing sideways, she snorted and lifted her head. Dan fought to keep Goldie under control. Marnie gripped the pommel tightly as Dan held her firmly. The rabbit gone, Goldie settled, and walked on, shaking her head as if a fly had flown up her nose.

Dan loosened his grip. "Sorry, if I hurt you."

Convinced he hated her, Marnie was quick to assure him she was fine. In truth, her ribs were aching and her backside was saddle sore.

Dan continued, "My sister, Meg, lives up by The Terraces. She's the Asterly's governess, and the Skippers school ma'am. Her employers allowed her to set up a school for the miners' children. They are kindly folk and paid for the building of the school. And then there's Kitty. Well, she's is the biggest chatterbox ever born

and she'll talk till your ear is about to drop off, but she's a fine wee seamstress for all that."

Marnie took a deep breath. "And your mother?"

His voice was solemn as he replied, "Ah yes, and then there's Ma." He paused then said brightly, "Oh but I'm forgetting our little Grace. She's my late sister Annie's child. She's a wee darlin'. Her hair sticks straight up like a hoar frost on a wire fence," he laughed. "She's been a comfort since her mother passed."

"I met Annie once," Marnie said softly, remembering the pale-faced, dark-haired young girl who had delivered Jack's love letter then disappeared like a vision. Even then, Annie looked as fine and fragile as bone china.

"Aye, was a terrible tragedy to lose her," Dan said, his voice tinged with bitter sadness.

They fell silent again. Now and then, Dan checked to see if she needed a rest stop. Marnie was in awe of the surroundings, treacherous and spectacular, the canyon was a grandiose sight. The way was narrow and steep and could make the bravest heart falter. The grey rock dust was as thick as fog in the air, and in the lungs. Beyond the road, the river was a turquoise ribbon that threaded its way through the golden canyon. Large, and threatening standing stones towered like giant beacons marking the way. Slowly, steadily, they made progress.

On the other side of the river they could see Hell's gate. Chinamen dangled from ropes plugging sticks of gelignite into the rock to form a road. It was a perilous task, as unstable parts of the rock face could slip at any moment, and they could be buried

alive under an avalanche of rubble. Marnie shuddered wondering how many dead men's bones were buried there.

Dan said, "Don't worry Goldie knows the track better than most, she'll get us there in one piece. What happens after that - well that I can't guarantee."



It was midday when the pack train rumbled to a stop. Mary went outside to meet it. She ticked off the supplies while Dusty stacked the goods neatly on the porch. Tea, sacks of sugar and flour, wood, blacklead, boot polish, lard, and thread. For a small thin gnarly man, Dusty was strong and fit. When he'd finished, Mary handed Dusty the bank notes she owed him. He smiled showing his yellowed teeth as his fist closed around the money. He tucked it safely away in his satchel and crossed out the debt in his ledger.

And with a final flourish said, "Oh yes and there's a letter for Miss Kitty. Is she about?"

Bewildered, Mary stared at the letter in Dusty's sun-blistered hand. Kitty had never received a letter in her life. Who could have sent her one?

Gathering her wits, she said, "No, Kitty's over at Greengate." She whipped the letter out of his grasp. "Don't worry, I'll see that she gets it."

"It's private and confidential," he insisted.

"She's my daughter," Mary snapped, giving Dusty a harrowing glare, "at fourteen, nothing's confidential."

Dusty knew Mary didn't like him. He thought it was because he'd been the one to bring her deserter of a husband back to her. But at the time he hadn't known the beaten bloodied man in the

back of his cart was Mary Healey's husband. He'd found the poor wretch left for dead down at the turn off and being the good Samaritan he was, he delivered the beggar to Mary believing she would be able to tend to his wounds, should he live. He thought she blamed him ever since.

Dusty placed a finger to his battered hat and saluted. "I'll be on my way then," he said, taking the leader's reins.

"Good day to you," Mary replied curtly. She didn't like people who stuck their noses in other's business and Dusty was far too nosy for his own good.

Seeking clues, Mary turned the letter over but the seal was indistinct. Frustrated, she placed the letter on the table propped up against the flower vase so Kitty would see the moment she came in. Then she went outside and moved some of the lighter stores from the porch leaving the heavier ones for the men to shift later.

Mary was convinced time was standing still. She checked the clock again. Curiosity was eating her like a swarm of hungry sandflies. She would open the letter, read it, seal it again, and Kitty would be none the wiser. She was about to hold the letter over the steaming kettle when she heard a child's distant cry. Hurriedly putting the letter back on the table she busied herself wrapping potatoes in newspaper to store in the cellar. Kitty came in the side door carrying a parcel under one arm and Grace in the other. Grace was red-faced from crying. Kitty put the parcel down on the bench and Grace on the floor. Grace started wailing again.

Mary used a rag to wipe the ink from her hands. "What's wrong with the wee besom?" she asked picking Grace up. Grace

stopped, she rubbed her tired eyes. Snuffling, she cuddled into Mary's shoulder.

Mary kissed Grace's tear stained face. "Shush, hush now," Mary said as she cradled Grace in her arms.

"Tired is all. Need a sleep, don't you little one?" Kitty smoothed Grace's wayward hair away from her face. Grace hiccupped back a sob, and sucked her thumb.

"You missed Meg, she was asking after you." Kitty was sceptical. Meg was so wrapped up in herself Kitty didn't think Meg could see past the end of her nose.

"Did you finish the veil?" Mary asked.

"Aye, all finished." Kitty said sagging with relief. "Hand stitched."

"There's a letter on the table for you."

Kitty's eyes lit up. "For me?" she shrieked, snatching the letter from its resting place.

"Well, open it." Mary jiggled Grace on her hip. She peered over Kitty's shoulder. "What does it say?" she asked, eyeing it with interest.

"I'll read it later," Kitty replied, pocketing the envelope.

Mary wanted to scream with impatience but keeping calm, she asked, "Who's it from?"

"I won't know till I open it, but since it's my very first letter I'm going to savour the moment." Taking her leave, Kitty went up the hall and opened the door to her room.

Exasperated, Mary watched Kitty disappear. She whispered in Grace's ear, "The horrid child has reached the challenging years

and is deliberately baiting me. Don't you grow up little one, I like you fine just the way you are."

Grizzly, Grace bored her pudgy fists into her tired eyes.

Mary sighed. "Come on, let's change that soggy bottom and put you to bed."



Kitty locked her bedroom door, and with trembling hands, she sucked in her breath and opened the envelope.

Dear Miss Katherine Healey,

We are delighted to inform you that you have been granted a three month trial apprenticeship at our Fashion house, in High Street, Dunedin.

Should we find your work acceptable, we will grant you a year's apprenticeship of which you are well aware of the costs.

We look forward to seeing you at 9.00am sharp on the 21th of January at our premises in High Street, Dunedin.

Sincerely yours

Madame Juliette le Roux

Head Dressmaker and Designer

de la Parisanne Fashion Boutique

Overcome with the sheer wonder of it all, still holding the letter tightly in her hand, Kitty flopped on the bed as limp as a rag doll. Granny's recommendation had opened the door! God in heaven, how was she going to tell her mother!



Marnie was fading. She hoped the hotel wasn't far away, even her eyes felt gritty.

"Do you need to rest?" Dan asked for the umpteenth time.

“Is it much further?” She couldn’t hide the hopeful squeak in her voice.

“No more than half a mile. See those smoke trails there?”

Following the line of his finger, she nodded.

“That smoke’s coming from the hotel’s chimneys,” he told her.

Marnie’s stomach clenched, soon she would meet the infamous Mary Healey.

She changed the subject. “Tell me, how did you meet Harry?”

“Ah Haerakia,” he smiled, remembering, “His last name is as long as your arm and just as hard to pronounce. We call him Harry for short and he likes it well enough.” Dan paused. “We met Harry the day Yankee tried to drown us. Yankee made two useless mokimoki, flax canoes,” he explained, “and we were attempting to cross the lake when they sank. We were dragged to shore by Harry and his dog. Harry lit a fire to keep us warm, and he and his dog lay down with us to stop us from freezing to death. Since we owed him our lives, we asked him to go mates with us on our claim, and it was a good thing we did.”

“Why?” Marnie asked, intrigued.

“We got claim jumped once. They beat us badly and ran us off our claim, but good old Harry rounded up his tribe and they sprung at them with clubs and adzes and beat the blighters to a pulp. Fearing for their lives, the blackguards scarpered and we’ve not been bothered since.” Dan chuckled softly to himself. “Come to think of it Harry is always rescuing us. When his old dog died, Yankee and I bought him Tu as a present. He has been happier about that pup than he ever has been about his share of the gold.”

"Is Tu a good dog then?"

"Yes, and a clever one too," he told her.

A little later, Dan said, "Do you know Maori legend has it that at the bottom of the lake there's a sleeping giant? They say that's why the lake rises and falls, they say it's the giant breathing."

"You're teasing me."

"No, it's true," he assured her.

They rounded the last bend, and Marnie caught her first glimpse of the Welcome Home. The hotel was a wooden building painted white with two large sash windows in the front and three on the side. It had a red corrugated iron roof, and five steps leading up to a large veranda. There was a hitching post and horse trough out front and stables on the right. Marnie took a steadying breath.

Dan murmured, "It's good we've arrived at opening time, Ma will be too busy to notice us."

"Isn't it always opening time?" Marnie asked, astonished.

"It is, but men don't come up from the river till it's nigh on dark. Ma kicks them out about midnight, she reckons nothing good happens after midnight."

The music coming from the hotel was lively. There were rowdy hoots and hollers and the stomping of hobnailed boots keeping time. Dan was relieved no one was outside on the veranda when they arrived. He went straight to the stables where he fed and watered his horse. Sitting on a pile of straw with her parasol resting across her lap, nursing her aching ribs, Marnie watched as Dan brushed Goldie down.

Dan shook his head. Marnie had left with nothing more than the clothes on her back and her precious parasol. Far be it from him to deny her the luxury of her one treasured item, but God only knew when she'd need it.

"I think it best if we go in the back way," he said glancing at the shortness of her dress which showed off her stockings and fine buckled boots. "Ma will be busy in the tavern but Kitty will feed us I'm sure." He sighed, knowing his mother would not take this inconvenience lightly. "I'm hoping Da will soften the way."

The more he spoke about his mother the more Marnie wanted to flee. Jack had sent her to this god forsaken place. Now she was trapped, with nowhere to go, and nowhere to hide. She wasn't even sure of the way back.

Dan pushed his hat further back on his head. "Right, here goes then," he said, leading Marnie around the back.



Kitty quietly closed the bedroom door, and was about to tiptoe away, when she heard a knock. Startled, she jumped. The door opened a crack and the chain rattled. Kitty covered her mouth to stop herself screaming.

"It's only me, Dan," Dan whispered through the gap.

Kitty raised the lantern. "Dear God in Heaven!" She placed her hand on her beating heart. "Daniel Healey, you scared me half to death," she scolded. Undoing the chain, she opened the door and let him in.

Dan put a warning finger to his lips. "I'm not alone."

"Is Yankee with you?" Kitty glanced past him.

"No." He stepped aside.

The cloaked figure removed her hood, revealing her long blonde ringlets and bruised face.

Fearing Kitty would jump to conclusions, Dan said, "This is Jack's lady friend."

"Jack's friend?" Kitty cried, aghast. "Then you must be...Marnie?"

Marnie's palms were sweating, she wiped her hands on her cloak. "Hello Kitty. It's nice to meet you."

"Well it's a surprise to meet you," Kitty replied honestly, studying Marnie's battered face.

Shedding his jacket, Dan hung his hat on the peg. Wary, he looked around. "Is Ma...?"

"Don't worry she's in the pub. Da's in the kitchen. Pat's gone over to Fox's for a few days to see some old friends." Kitty gave him a meaningful look.

Dan rolled his eyes as if he expected as much. "We didn't come to see him."

"Are you hungry?" Kitty asked.

"I am," Dan replied. "And I expect Marnie could eat her arm as well."

Marnie nodded, her pretty ringlets bouncing like springs.

Dan licked his lips. "And, I'm as dry as the inside of a furnace."

"Come on then, I'll see what I can find." Kitty led the way down the passageway and opened the door to the kitchen. Jim's chair was in the half shadow, he was dozing by the warmth of the fire, his unlit pipe hanging limply from his mouth. The draught made him shiver, and he popped one eye open.

Jim leapt to his feet. "Danny, my boy!" He rushed to greet him but stopped abruptly when he saw Marnie.

Self-conscious, Marnie shifted uneasily, staring at her feet wishing the ground would swallow her.

Dan coughed. "Hello Da." He gave his father a grim smile. "Da, this is Jack's lady friend, Marnie. She needs a place to stay."

Jim bit down on his pipe. Struggling to find words he finally managed to croak, "Ah Jack's...well...hello Marnie."

"Mr Healey," Marnie said, her eyes on the floorboards.

Kitty said, "Da, take Marnie's cloak, will you, while I fix them something to eat. I can hear their stomachs growling." Kitty disappeared into the larder and they could hear the clatter of plates.

Jim went to take Marnie's cloak but Marnie was reluctant to part with it. She was keenly aware that her scarlet dress was too bright, the bodice too low and the hem of her skirt too high.

"No, its fine, really," she insisted but Jim pressed her until Marnie finally allowed him to take it. Marnie felt like she was standing before the clergy naked.

Dan took his place at the table. Jim ushered Marnie into a seat at the table. Kitty returned with plates of cold mutton pie, and cheese and chutney sandwiches which she placed in front of them, then disappearing again, she returned with some apple cider for Marnie.

"What would you like to drink, Dan?" Kitty asked, lightly touching his shoulder. Dan desperately wanted to wash away the taste of the road with some strong spirits but didn't want to drink in front of his father.

“Ah, water will do nicely,” Dan replied, seeking Jim’s approval.

“It’s all right son, if you want something stronger, have it,” Jim told him. Jim desperately wanted something to fortify himself too. For the life of him, he wasn’t sure how he was going to stop Mary erupting like a volcano when she saw what, or rather who, was sitting at her table. He could hardly hide Marnie on the property and hope to God Mary wouldn’t notice.

“I’ll have another cup of tea, thanks love,” he called to Kitty.

Ravenous, Dan devoured sandwiches, two slices of pie and downed a glass of cider while Marnie daintily nibbled at hers like a little mouse. She washed her food down with a sip of cider, wincing as it stung her cut lip.

Kitty’s face grew grave as she handed her father a mug of tea. “Da, there’s something I need to tell you,” she confessed. Taking the letter from her apron pocket she handed it to him. “I guess now is as good as time as any. I’ll need you to break the news to, Ma, and the way I see it we might as well hang for a horse as for a sheep.”

Jim took the letter, not a fast reader he took his time, but as he got to the bottom he realized Kitty meant to be going.

He looked at her, incredulous. “What’s the meaning of this?” he asked. “Do you want your mother to die of an apoplexy?” He handed the letter to Dan.

Dan read it slowly, then stared up at Kitty, “You are not really...”

The door from the tavern opened and Mary entered the room. Kitty snatched the letter from Dan’s hand and quickly hid it in her

apron pocket. Mary was halfway across the room before she noticed they had company.

Mary's face lit up "Dan!" But froze when she saw Marnie.

Dan's chair scraped loudly on the wooden floor as he rose. "Ma."

Mary bristled, "Who's this? And what's she doing here?"

There was a wheeze of silence.

Finally, Jim said, "This is Jack's friend, Marnie. She needs a place to stay."

Mary's head swivelled from one man to the other and back again. The music in the bar stopped.

"Stay right where you are," Mary told them brusquely. She went back into the tavern. They listened as Mary barked orders, her voice easily travelling through the thin scrim walls. The accordion player started up again and this time was joined by a fiddler, once again there was the heavy stomping of hobnailed boots. Mary reappeared. Securing the door behind her, she leaned against it.

"Someone better start talking," she said, her green eyes sparking. Mary's voice was low but controlled. "This is a decent hotel. No place for a whore. I run a respectful establishment and I'll not have the likes of her within these walls."

"Now Mary," Jim said cautiously, as one does when trying to soothe a wild beast, but it was too late, Mary's dander was up and she wasn't about to be pacified by a few choice words.

Kitty blurted, "Jack and Marnie are to be married, Ma."

“What!” Mary cried, rounding on her daughter. “The hell he is!” she blustered, puffing up indignantly. “The boy’s too young to wed without my permission.”

Marnie was scared, her heart was racing. Mary Healey was a volatile woman and there was no telling what she’d do. And if Jack had lied about his age what else had he lied about? If he couldn’t marry without their permission, had he ever intended to marry her? Trapped, she searched for a way out but Dan was standing against the door that led to the passage, and Mary blocked the other door. There was no escape.

“Now Mary,” Jim lowered his voice. “You can see the girl’s been beaten, she just needs a place to stay until she’s mended.”

“Don’t you try that on with me, James Healey,” Mary warned pushing him out of the way. “I know what you’re up to.” Arms tightly folded across her chest, the toe of Mary’s boot tapped a steady rhythm on the floorboards. She smouldered with rage.

“Think about it Ma,” Kitty said, carelessly wading into the fray. “We need an extra pair of hands around the place. Marnie will be able to help with the chores.”

Rounding on Kitty, Mary pointed wildly at Marnie and declared, “Do you think that strumpet has ever done a day’s work in her life? All she knows is how to lie on her back. She wouldn’t know one end of the broom from the other.”

Marnie was shrinking before their eyes. Jim came to her defence, placing a solid hand on Marnie’s shoulder. She was as brittle as a sun-baked thread.

“Just a couple of days, Mary, till she heals, and then we can see what’s what after that.”

Mary advanced, stabbing a finger at Marnie, she said, "You'll burn that dress and those stockings."

Marnie kept her eyes lowered while Mary ranted.

"Kitty will fix you a bath, and you'll scrub yourself raw before you sleep between any of my sheets." With a face like thunder, Mary's gaze shifted to Kitty. "And since you're so damn keen to have her as a pet she can sleep in your bed, and you can give her something decent of yours to wear." Turning her attention back to Marnie she raged, "And you'll brush out those ringlets, and cover your head with a cap, and you'll not," she paused for breath, "go anywhere near my tavern, or let anyone other than family see you. No one is to know you are here. Do I make myself clear?"

Marnie nodded, her blue eyes blurring with tears. Mary went back into the tavern slamming the door so hard it was in danger of coming off its hinges.

"Well, that went better than I expected," Jim said, relieved.

Dan downed the last of his cider. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he said, "Just wait till she hears Kitty means to desert. I hope to be long gone when that happens."

"Aye," Jim agreed, wishing he could as well.



Kitty led Marnie out the back way to the washhouse. Telling her to stay put, Kitty went back and forth to the pump to fill the tub, then took many trips to the kitchen to bring back hot water from the stove. The short tin tub was only half full but Kitty had endured enough fetching and carrying, and decided that the bath

was deep enough. After checking the temperature, Kitty put a few drops of lavender oil in the bath water.

“Here’s the pumice and soap,” Kitty said passing them to Marnie. “I’ll just go get a towel and dressing gown.” She slipped out the door again leaving Marnie alone in the wooden shed.

The light from the kerosene lantern was soft in the otherwise cold and shadowy washhouse. Marnie was delighted with the prospect of having a bath. She was dusty from the journey and her hair felt greasy. She was perfectly aware she wasn’t welcome at the Welcome Home. Dan was cold and standoffish. Jim was nice, and Kitty a darling, but Mary Healey scared her half to death. Jack better be true to his word and come for her soon, or she’d never forgive him for abandoning her in this God awful place. She gingerly lowered herself into the tin tub and enjoyed the warm water caressing her sore limbs. Her ribs ached, her eye was swollen shut, and her split lip smarted but she closed her eyes and sighed, the water felt amazing, like it had healing properties.



A fire graced the hearth bathing the bedroom in a soft golden glow. Looking like a heaven sent cherub, Grace was sleeping in her wrought iron crib, her thumb thrust in her mouth, and her little padded bottom stuck high in the air. Kitty placed the flickering candleholders on the mantelpiece, and covered Grace with the quilt.

“The chamber pot is under the bed if you need it,” Kitty informed Marnie.

Marnie nodded.

Quietly, so as not to wake the babe, Kitty opened the wooden chest at the end of the bed. "Here," Kitty said, handing Marnie one of her nightgowns.

Casting the robe aside, Marnie shrugged the white cotton nightgown over her head, threaded her arms through the sleeves, and tied the drawstrings under her bosom.

"Sit close to the fire so your hair dries quicker," Kitty suggested removing the fire guard. "I'll brush it out for you."

Marnie sat on the rag mat before the open fire while Kitty changed into her night things. Picking up her ivory hairbrush Kitty knelt behind Marnie, and humming softly to herself she began to brush Marnie's hair with long, slow, rhythmic strokes.

"You have beautiful hair," Kitty murmured, braiding Marnie's hair in a single plait.

Marnie's tone was bitter. "I'm surprised your mother hasn't insisted I shave my head."

Kitty placed a comforting hand on Marnie's shoulder. "Don't worry, Ma might be as prickly as a hedgehog but there's a soft belly underneath. It will be all right, you'll see."

Hugging her knees into her chest, Marnie stared miserably into the fire. If Mary Healey was going to give her a bed she'd be earning her keep, and having done no household chores since she was ten, Marnie doubted her ability to perform them well enough to satisfy Mary Healey. If Jack didn't come and rescue her soon, she'd end up like a poor old workhorse, flogged to death.

Marnie gripped Kitty's hand in hers. "I'd be a whole lot happier if knew you weren't leaving. Don't go," she pleaded.

Kitty looked misty for a moment. "If I can, I must. Don't worry, Jack will come for you."

But when? When would he come? How long would she have to endure Mary Healey's cutting tongue. Marnie sighed. It was no use, she would have to make the most of being stuck way out here, that's if Mary Healey didn't throw her out on her ear. When Jack arrived, there was no way Mary Healey would let them marry, then what? Would they run away? Where would they go? How would they survive? What would they do for money?

Sensing Marnie's distress, Kitty attempted to cheer Marnie by saying, "Meg will visit."

"But she's to be married soon, isn't she?" Marnie replied gloomily.

"Yes," Kitty said sadly, looking suddenly vulnerable. She tiptoed over to the oval mirror and brushed her auburn curls.

Marnie felt guilty. Kitty looked fragile and she didn't know what she'd said to upset her. "Won't you miss your family?"

Kitty looped her curls up in a topknot and straightened. "I am fourteen. Old enough to leave home."

Marnie frowned. "Are you all right? You seem a little preoccupied."

"Tired, as I expect you are," Kitty answered with a tight smile.

Marnie was exhausted. The pain from her injuries, combined with the pent-up emotions of leaving the brothel, the journey to Long Gully, and her fear of meeting Mary Healey had sapped her strength.

"Let's go to sleep," Kitty suggested. "Everything is sure to look better in the morning."

Marnie doubted it. She slid between the starched sheets, Kitty got in the other side and pulled the patchwork quilt up to her chin, then snuffed the candle.

Kitty quietly said, "I miss my sisters. There aren't many girls my age in this area, so it's nice to have you here."

"Annie sounded lovely," murmured Marnie.

"She was," Kitty replied, her voice bruised.

Marnie was sincere. "You're very kind. You have been kind to me."

"We will be friends," Kitty decided. Moments later, Kitty asked, "Did you have any friends at the brothel?"

"Yes, I have friends but Daisy is my best friend. She's kept me sane. She's the reason I haven't killed myself." Marnie felt a pang of regret. She'd never got to say goodbye to Daisy, now she never would.

Kitty sighed. "You will miss her."

"Aye," Marnie's eyes grew moist.

Kitty whispered, "Do you have any sisters?"

"No, Daisy was the closest thing to a sister I had." Marnie blinked.

"Then we will be friends and sisters," Kitty said, smiling in the darkness.

Marnie could not speak for the lump in her throat.

Kitty spoke to the ceiling. "I'm worried. Meg left without Ma's blessing and it took Ma a long time to get over it. She's not going to be happy when she hears my news."

Marnie desperately hoped Mary would refuse to let Kitty go.

Kitty rolled over. "Tell me what's it like - at the brothel?" she whispered.

Marnie spoke candidly. "You don't want to know, it's not for the likes of your innocent ears."

"But I'm interested, do you have to go with a man, or can you refuse?"

"If you refuse you'd get your face and other parts blackened. You do what you're told, and you can either choose to make the most of it, or live a very sullen, depressed existence."

"It is nice wearing satins and laces?"

"Sure it's nice to have nice things but having your bits exposed for men to lust over isn't. It's easier not to feel, not to think, just act the part, and give them what they want, it's the only way to survive."

"I'm sorry Marnie." Kitty found Marnie's shoulder and gave it a small squeeze.

Grace snuffled and turned in her sleep.

There was a moments silence then Kitty propped herself up on her elbow. "Why do you love Jack?" she asked, curious.

"Because he loves me, the real me. I see it in his eyes."

"And you? Do you love him?"

"I wouldn't be here otherwise." Marnie changed the subject. "Dan told me Yankee holds a candle for Meg, but she loves Mr Burns. Is that true?"

"Mr Burns was in love with Annie, and he came to Long Gully to ask for her hand. We had to tell him that Annie had passed away."

Marnie was wistful. Annie would always remain immortal, beautiful and timeless in death. "It's so tragic."

"Yes," agreed Kitty. "And Meg is but a poor substitute." She turned and faced the wall.

Marnie frowned, surprised by the sting in Kitty's words. The room was quiet apart from the crackling flames.

Marnie whispered, "Does Meg love Mr Burns?"

But there was no reply other than a loud snore.

Eyelids heavy with the drag of sleep, Marnie realised it was the first time in a long time, no one was demanding anything of her body. She shut her eyes and slept.



Mary got ready for bed without a word. Her angry silence made the air feel brittle. Jim knew better to attempt a kiss or cuddle when Mary was in a mood, so he pretended to be asleep. The bed dipped slightly as Mary got in.

"I know you're awake, James Healey," she said, through tightly-gritted teeth. She prodded him in the kidneys with the tip of her finger. "Don't pretend otherwise."

"No," he replied, his eyes closed. "I'm definitely asleep."

She swatted him with her pillow. "What's the meaning of letting that young strumpet in my house?"

Pushing the pillow aside, Jim wearily sat up. "All right, I'm not asleep. And if you really want to know, I snuck that young beauty in here to have my wicked way with her under your very nose," he said fractiously.

Mary belted him again.