

Sticks and Stones

Chapter 1

There was the sound of a key turning in the lock, the solid steel door opened then clanged shut; sounding hollow. The prisoner's head turned as boots sounded heavy on the cold flagstone floor walking stiffly down the corridor towards him. A patch of light from the small iron-barred window at the top of his cell blanched the dusty darkness. From the shapes, the prisoner could tell one was a woman, one the guard, and the other a priest. He recognised the woman and his heart squeezed in pain. Every curve of her had burnt into his brain. That temptress had been his downfall. That she-devil, he cursed, was the reason he was here, behind bars.

The woman drew near the bars but did not put her hands on them; her eyes were ice cold and her body taut. She was slight, dressed tidily in a neat grey day dress, nipped in at the waist. She wore a bonnet that framed her pretty face and covered her fiery red curls.

"What's she doing here?" Charlie demanded of the guard; his voice icy with hate.

"Mrs. Healey, of Long Gully, requested an audience with you," the gaoler told him, giving the prisoner a baleful stare.

"I don't wish to see her." The prisoner turned his back, shunning his visitors.

Mary looked at the scruffy hunched figure of Charles Butler sometimes known as Champagne Charlie, a man she had once known and trusted, and fought the urge to vomit. It had been well over a year since she had last seen him, but in the haunts of her dreams, she could still feel the terror of his hands around her neck, and the heat of the flames as the hotel burned to the ground. Charlie's beard was full and matted, and his hat had been taken from him so he had nothing to hide his baldpate. He had always hated being seen without

his large black slouch hat. His hands were rough with callouses, and his prison garb, grey serge jacket, and corduroy trousers were ripped and worn.

There must be no sympathy. Be strong. Get revenge! Must have justice, for Jim's sake, someone must pay, she told herself.

"I wish to speak with you," Mary said, desperately trying to keep her voice even. She did not want him to know how much he had affected her.

"What fer?" Charlie turned around; his eyes full of scorn. "I got nothing to say to the likes of you, whore. I thought you were dead."

"Well, I'm not," Mary returned, her voice echoing around the walls.

Charlie squinted at her and grinned. "He is though."

Mary flinched. Did Charlie know, or had he guessed? "We escaped the fire."

Realising he had hit a nerve, he studied her with shrewd knowing eyes.

"I wanted to see you before..." she mocked, putting her gloved hands to her throat.

Charlie addressed the guard. "Take them away. I don't want no visitors. I got nothing to say to the likes of them."

The gaoler, a rugged, pockmarked fellow, feigned deafness, clasping his hands behind his back he pretended to study a gouge mark on the far wall.

"Well, I've plenty to say to you," Mary replied, keeping her tone clipped and neat.

Charlie grunted. "Save it for the courtroom, bitch." He turned back to face the wall.

"I wanted to see you before your execution."

"I've not been tried yet," he countered.

They were parrying, swordplay with tongues, each wanting to cut deep and watch the other bleed.

“You will be,” she said matter-of-factly. “You will be tried, and they will hang you.” She wanted to hear the death sentence pronounced. She wanted Charlie dead. Jim was dead, and someone needed to pay. Charles Butler tried to kill them both so he was the perfect sacrifice. She was not one to wait for the good Lord to avenge her, she didn’t have the patience, she wanted justice now. In a jealous fit of passion, Charlie doused them with whisky and set the hotel buildings alight. He’d succeeded in burning her precious hotel to the ground but he’d failed in his attempt to murder them. She paled at the memory. There was a tightness in her throat. It was like the smoke was choking her all over again. A wave of nausea hit her and her legs felt wobbly. She chided herself for it. It was not like her to be a coward.

The priest noticed, and gently touched her arm, his youthful face creasing with concern. “It’s been a long journey and you look tired. You should rest. Perhaps you should return to the hotel.”

Father Whooley was a friend. He’d helped Jim find sobriety and had walked faithfully alongside the family since Jim’s passing. Mary didn’t usually allow herself to lean on anyone, but the priest had proved a compassionate companion; a wise old soul despite his tender years. He was a good intermediary between God and the devil, and she needed someone to speak to both on her behalf. She was having trouble believing in a loving God when He’d taken the man she loved from her, not once, but twice, and this time, forever.

Conceding she was weary, Mary reluctantly nodded. The coach ride was bone shaking, nauseating and painfully long, and seeing Charlie again had drained her more than she could have imagined. Hate was poisoning her soul. Not wanting Charlie to think he had the upper hand, she said, “Aye, there’s nothing to see here but a condemned old lag.” And, lifting her chin, she walked towards the heavy solid iron door and waited for the guard to

unlock it for her. Summoned, the gaoler fumbled with the keys while Mary waited impatiently for him to unlock it.

Charlie called after her. "It's you that don't deserve to live, yer filthy slut."

She jerked as if she'd been shot, then turned. "Neither do you Charles Butler, and I'm here to make sure you don't."

"Rot in Hell," Charlie jeered, unrepentant.

"You'll be there long before me," Mary replied. The gaoler opened the door and she swept past him, and out into the corridor's long dark throat. The gaoler looked stricken for a moment, wondering whether to follow her. He didn't want to leave the priest alone with the felon, but the priest didn't appear ready to go. The prisoner was behind bars and the priest didn't have the key, nor did he look like he was stupid enough to get too close. While the gaoler was debating with himself, Father Whooley signalled the guard to follow Mary.

"My parishioner has the right to be alone with me to confess," he reminded, and was left alone with the prisoner.

"And you can go as well, I ain't done nothing to confess," grunted Charlie.

"Do you remember me?" Father Whooley asked, moving into the patch of light. His hair, the colour of clean straw, clean-shaven face and youth were in stark contrast to the scruff of humanity behind the bars.

Charlie narrowed his gaze. He shook his head. "Nah, should I?"

"I'm Father Frances' successor. Perhaps you remember him?"

A flicker of recognition in Charlie's eyes told Father Whooley that Butler remembered.

"I'm protestant," Charlie grumbled.

"Really? The warden has you down as Catholic. You were baptised Catholic."

“He’s wrong. I’m nothing. Go away, I don’t want to talk to you especially not with the company you keep.”

“Why’s that then?”

“That woman, that woman there led me a merry dance she did. Pretending she was widowed, getting a man’s blood to boiling point, and then...” he broke off realising he’d said too much.

“And then?” prompted the priest.

The damn had burst. “And then telling me she was married, and the drunken lout sleeping in the stables was her lawful husband.” He spat the word – husband like it was a filthy word.

“You mean Jim?”

Charlie shrugged. “I don’t know his name; we were never properly introduced.” He hunched his shoulders resembling a bull with no neck.

“Jim is dead.”

Charlie looked up with interest. “Is that so.”

The priest carefully watched the bald squat man’s face for clues as he said, “He was killed.”

Charlie smirked. “Good job.”

Father Whooley continued, unphased, “When he fell from his horse.”

“Mmph,” snorted Charlie. He wiped a finger under his nose and sniffed. “He’d be better off in the pits of Hell than living with that shrew.”

“I’ll visit you again tomorrow,” the Father said, walking towards the iron door. He rapped on it and waited to be released.

“Don’t bother, I’ve got nothing to say.”

Undeterred, the young priest said, "Tomorrow then." He nodded as the gaoler unlocked the door and let him pass.

Fighting nausea, Mary waited in the corridor with the gaoler. She didn't speak but pressed a hand against the blue-stone wall for support as she glanced around the oppressive surroundings. The smell of unwashed bodies and, unemptied waste buckets turned her stomach. Lunatics yelled, raving madness, that she couldn't understand. Others, moved listlessly from one place to another, silently, looking like ghosts behind the barred walls. Mary shuddered.

A mishmash of buildings: the men's block was wooden, the women's prison made of brick and, the debtor's prison - built of steel. The prison was a labyrinth, corridors leading into corridors, cells into cells. Sentenced to hard labour, the male prisoners whittled Bell Hill away, one shovelful at a time. It was late in the day and all the prisoners were locked in their cells. Some eight to a cell, bunks lining either side of the walls. Unlike the Australian prisons, this prison wasn't run on a separation and silence policy, Dunedin Gaol was rowdy and overcrowded. Only serious offenders, like Charlie, were placed in solitary cells. Mary saw a shuffling prisoner in the distance, the guard appeared to be moving the prisoner towards the triangle to be lashed. She blanched. The man was probably going to be punished for some minor misdemeanour. She hated injustice and fought against it all her life, and now she was here to ensure she got justice against a man she almost took to her bed.

Mary held her stomach and took in thirsty gulps of air. She put a hand against the wall to steady herself. She had come for revenge, and by God, she'd have it. She had longed for this, for revenge. The meeting with Charlie had not gone as she'd imagined. She had

imagined herself stronger, less affected, by the man she'd once thought of as a friend and confidant. Jealousy was a dangerous bedfellow; it turned the angels into evildoers.

Mildly concerned, the guard watched her but didn't interfere. He kept one eye on the priest through the peek hole and glanced back at her now and then, waiting for her to speak. Startled, Mary jumped as she heard banging on the solid iron door. The guard took the ring of keys from his belt and opened the heavy door to let the priest out.

Father Whooley thanked the guard. His eyes lighted on Mary's pale face and he could tell she was struggling with her emotions. "Are you all right, Mary?" he asked. He crooked his arm and she accepted it, pleased for the warmth and solidness of his presence.

"I will be," she promised. "It was the shock of seeing him again combined with the journey, it's taken its toll."

"Aye, it is to be expected."

"Follow me." The guard led the way down the long corridor and unlocked the outer door. The first guard signed them out and they were escorted out of the prison gates by another guard to the outer wall, and after they had made their mark, he let them out the small side gate. Once they were clear of the forbidding building with its high prison gates, watchtowers and arches, Mary relaxed her shoulders and rubbed at the knot at the base of her skull. She was grateful for the sunshine and fresh air. The air in the prison was stale and reeked of the smell of unwashed bodies. When she felt they were far enough away from the prison she sat on a short stone wall and watched the water lap the foreshore, waiting for the nausea to pass.

Father Whooley shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. "Do you blame me, Mary?" he asked.

"Blame you?" Mary stared up at him, incredulous. "What for?"

“For asking Jim to sit on the committee? If he hadn’t gone to Queenstown that day he wouldn’t have fallen from his horse, and would still be alive.” His voice sounded strangled as he added, “Do you want to hang me too?”

She stood abruptly. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she said, brushing the dust off the back of her skirts, “of course I don’t,” she retorted irritably, adding, “It was an accident.”

It might have been an accident, but Father Whooley knew Jim was drunk at the time of his fall. He blamed himself, for putting too much temptation in Jim’s way. He’d been the one to ask Jim to Queenstown to sit on the building committee, and when Jim was returning home, he’d fallen from his horse into a shallow creek. Concussed, he died of the frostbite a day later. Jim had been drunk at the time of the fall, not that Mary knew that, and Father Whooley didn’t intend to tell her. For Mary to learn her husband was drunk at the time of the accident after a year of sobriety would have only caused more pain, and she had suffered enough. It was a great disappointment to Father Whooley, as he’d been the one to help Jim dry out. He’d suffered the agony along with his friend, and to learn the awful truth that Jim had been under the influence at the time of his demise had cut him in two, and left him with the need to make amends.

It was only a few days after Jim’s death, when a committee member, Jenkins, had come to the confessional booth and told him that he’d spiked Jim’s tea with vodka and felt responsible for Jim’s accident. He’d absolved the wretched Jenkins, even though he’d wanted to grab him by the collar and strike his head against the confessional booth wall. Now, he longed to appease his own soul. He must do penance, and part of that was helping Jim’s widow, Mary, by supporting her during this time of pain and grief.

Mary had seen the heaviness of guilt sitting on the young man’s shoulders, so she lowered her voice. “I don’t blame you. Jim was hell-bent on going. Honoured, he was. Wild

horses couldn't have stopped him. I just want someone to pay, and as Charlie tried to kill us, he'll do."

Father Whooley paused for a moment before saying, "Hanging Charlie won't bring Jim back."

Mary tightened her jaw. "I know, but knowing Charles Butler is going to burn in Hell will sure make me feel better." When he didn't respond, she said, "Charles Butler burned my hotel to the ground and tried to burn me with it. He might not have succeeded in killing us but it was not for lack of trying, Father."

He shook his head sadly, saying, "This bitterness is a dark worm in your soul, Mary."

"Don't tell me to forgive and forget," she hissed, "for I can do neither."

He was used to Mary's passionate outbursts. He had borne the brunt of her fury more than once, but he was wise enough to know now was not the time for arguments, for when Mary was in a temper you couldn't reason with her.

"Come, Kitty will be waiting for you," he said calmly, diffusing her wrath. Father Whooley offered to pay for a cab but Mary empathically refused, saying she preferred to stretch her legs and walk. Mindful of Mary's vulnerability, the priest walked slowly beside her and did not press her to make small talk; his way was to admonish gently and encourage her to lead a godly life.

It was early evening, and not yet dark. The air was still warm and they needed the exercise for they had travelled for two bone-shaking days by coach to Dunedin. The only light in Mary's darkness was the chance to see her daughter again. Kitty, Mary's youngest, still looked childlike for her fifteen years. The image of her mother, petite with her mass of bright red curls, green eyes and young freckled face, she reminded one of a porcelain doll, but where Mary was a tough customer hardened by life, Kitty had a soft warm nature not

yet hardened by experience with the world and all its tragedies. Kitty had begged to be allowed to go to Dunedin and work as an apprentice dressmaker and with the family bullying her to relent, Mary had reluctantly agreed. A decision she had regretted ever since.

When Mary had bought the hotel, three years ago, she'd had three daughters to help run the place, now she had to do the donkey work alone. Her middle girl, Meg, had run off to work as a governess for the Asterlys' children, then up and married a man she wasn't engaged to. Her eldest, Annie, had died in childbirth, then Kitty had begged to be allowed to be a dressmaker's apprentice in Dunedin. She felt deserted by them all. Last year, Kitty had been an enormous help, not only with the household chores but also in caring for baby Grace. Grace was Annie's child, almost two, and a darling, but being older now, Mary was finding bringing up her granddaughter, as well as running the hotel, exhausting. How she wished Annie had survived the birth, as the dear girl would have been a wonderful mother. Mary sighed. If God was in charge of all, he didn't seem to know what he was doing, for as far as she was concerned, he took the good, and left the bad. Anxiety plucked at her highly-strung nerves. She hoped Meg was coping well enough with the wee one. Grace could be a handful at times, and you had to watch her like a hawk around the fireplaces. Although Meg had been a governess and a teacher and was used to being around children, she wasn't used to having the sole responsibility of a little one. If Yankee was about, and not off mustering sheep, then between them she was sure Grace would be in good hands. Meg was stubborn and hard-headed but as soft as melted butter when it came to Grace. The child was bound to be spoilt beyond measure while she was staying with them and she would have to undo all the bad habits Grace had learned when she returned home. If she returned. She wondered if Meg had broached the subject with Yankee yet and, if so, how it

had gone. Tears pricked her eyes. Could she bear to be without Grace? Mary stopped abruptly.

“Do you need to stop and rest, Mary?” Father Whooley asked. He was used to people struggling to keep up with his long-legged lope. “You need lungs like a set of bellows for these steep streets, but it’s not far now.”

“I’m fine, Father,” she assured him, puffing slightly. “I just remembered something, that’s all.”

“Anything you want to talk about?” he asked.

“No, no, it’s nothing.” Mary batted away the question like a pesky fly. “Come on,” and she set off up the hill towards The Wains. Not far from the gaol, set on Princes Street, The Wains hotel architecture was unique with its Italian style columns, and carved figures of Bacchus, Neptune and his mermaids under the balconies, and the keystone stone eagle perched above the canopy, guarding the entrance.

Opening the door, they were greeted by inviting luxury, a huge chandelier hung from the plastered cornice ceiling in the hotel lobby, the tiled black and white patterned floor, and the curved staircase added to its grandeur. They discovered Kitty sitting in one of the high-backed chairs in the reception area, her eyes closed, fast asleep. Mary placed her hand on Kitty’s shoulder and shook her gently. Startled, Kitty jumped, and held her beating heart.

“Oh, Ma, how wonderful to see you!” Kitty gushed. Jumping up, she threw her arms around Mary and kissed her mother’s cheek.

“And you, my girl, and you,” Mary whispered in her daughter’s hair.

Kitty let go and stepped back. “I’m sorry, I only closed my eyes for a few seconds,” Kitty apologised. “I’ve missed you so much and longed to see you, especially since...Da...” she trailed off not knowing quite how to phrase it. She couldn’t bring herself to say, died.

Death was too final, it was like if she didn't say the word, then it wasn't true, and she could go on pretending Da was alive, he'd just gone walkabout - again.

Mary studied her youngest child carefully. She was well dressed, suitably respectable in her grey dress, with buttons up the front, and lace collar, some black velvet piping to detail the seams, but Kitty looked pale and drawn. She was too thin by half and needed feeding, for pity's sake. The poor thing had bags and rings under her eyes. They were working her too hard at the dressmaker's shop. Mary had half a mind to give the woman who owned the shop, and the woman who ran the boarding house, a good piece of her mind and take Kitty back home, where she belonged. Besides, now there was no reason for Kitty to stay away, nothing more than stubborn pride as far as Mary could see. After the trial was over, she would persuade Kitty to return to Long Gully.

Father Whooley hovered behind Mary until the two women had stopped their rush of questions stepped into the light. "Lovely to see you again, Kitty," he said, with a generous smile. "I trust you are well?" Not for the first time, Kitty thought it was a crying shame that this handsome young man was a priest, for he would have made someone a fine husband.

"Ah, it's good to see you too, Father," Kitty returned his smile. "I'm well enough, thank you."

"I'm sure you two ladies have much to discuss so I'll leave you now."

"Are you staying with the Bishop?" Kitty asked.

"Yes, indeed." He politely bowed to the ladies. "See you tomorrow, at court."

"Goodbye Father," Kitty said, her smile fading. She did not want to think about tomorrow, every time she did her stomach knotted. It was bound to be in all the papers.

"Light a candle for Jim, won't you?" Mary requested.

"I always do," he replied, his blue eyes soft with sadness.

Kitty stifled a yawn.

“Come, let me show you the way to our room.” Mary led Kitty upstairs. After the steepness of the hills the stairs were as nothing. Tiredness descended on Mary like a heavy blanket, her emotions draining her energy. She had been so busy before leaving Long Gully, her sole focus being on seeing Charlie hanged, she hadn’t had time for anything else. Now, feeling suddenly overwhelmed, she could barely put one foot in front of the other. She turned the key in the lock, opened the door, and stepped inside. Candles lent a soft buttery light to the room, the heavy green velvet drapes were pulled to, and the bed turned down. There was a tall mirrored wardrobe in one corner, a washstand and basin near it, and a patterned petticoat chair in the other. The porter had placed her hatbox on the dresser and her bags at the foot of the wrought iron bed. Mary looked longingly at the bed and hoped it was as soft and inviting as it looked. Dear God, she hoped she would sleep tonight, her mind had been too full to allow her any rest, it was like having a head full of squirrels, thoughts darting here, there and everywhere.

Kitty sat on the bed and watched her mother remove her hat and gloves, placing her bonnet carefully on the hat stand, pulling the pins from her hair and letting it fall free about her shoulders. It curled like coiled snakes. “Ah, that’s better,” Mary said tussling her red curls with her fingertips. There were a few silvery threads of grey just starting to show at the temples. She frowned briefly at the mirror before turning her attention on Kitty.

Bursting with curiosity, Kitty couldn’t stand to wait another minute and blurted, “Did they let you see Charlie, Ma?”

“Aye, they did,” Mary said, the feelings of the meeting coming back to the surface, making her feel as fragile as eggshell china. Mary knew she had a reputation as a tough old boot and most of the time she was, but she knew there were cracks in her leather;

weakness that someone like Charlie knew how to exploit. Her weakness was her love for family. She did not care about what folks said, they could go hang, but she cared about her children as fiercely as a lioness protects her cubs, and would gladly die for any of them.

Kitty was waiting for a reply.

“And, I told him I’d make sure he’d swing,” Mary said, her voice sounding caustic to her ears. Sighing with exhaustion, she sank into the petticoat chair and, placed the soft cushion behind her back.

Wide-eyed with anticipation, Kitty fired questions in quick succession. “Did you speak to him? What did he say? Did he say anything? Is Charlie the Pickaxe Murderer?” Kitty asked with barely a breath between.

“He’s confessed to nothing, and shows no remorse.”

Kitty couldn’t believe it. Charlie had been a family friend, now he was a criminal, some said a murderer, and some reckoned he was the notorious Pickaxe Murderer. Many victims had been found in, and around, the canyon with a pickaxe hole in the back of their skull, and being new, or unknown in the area, they were simply buried where they lay, or in the nearest cemetery in a pauper’s grave. Charlie had torched the hotel, and if she, and Grace, hadn’t been staying with Meg at the Asterlys’ at the time, they could have all been burnt to cinders. Kitty shivered as a chill ran down her spine.

She changed the subject, “How’s little Grace?” There wasn’t a day that Kitty didn’t think of the little one. She missed her niece dearly, but knew if she had stayed in Long Gully, she would have taken on the role of Grace’s surrogate mother. She was too young for that! She needed to enjoy freedom at least for a couple more years. She wanted more than housework and child rearing, and she wanted her own shop one day.

“Grace is grand. My arms feel empty without her.” Mary started removing her layers of clothing. “This darn old whalebone is pinching me something horrid,” she complained. “It will do Meg good to have Grace for a little while, get her used to having a babe around.”

Mary had met Meg and Yankee on the Queenstown wharf, and during the handover, while Yankee was busy putting Grace into the rowboat, Mary had quietly mentioned to Meg that perhaps she’d like to adopt Grace, saying that way when Meg had children of her own, Grace would have siblings to grow up with. After the initial surprised reaction, Meg had promised she would talk to Yankee about it, then she’d climbed in the boat and held Grace securely on her lap, and they waved back as Yankee rowed across the lake. Heart heavy, Mary had stood on the wharf and waved until she thought her arm would break. Yes, a child at Riverstones would help prepare Meg for when she had her own, but could she bear to let the little one go? Seemed like all she did these days was say goodbye.

Kitty yawned again.

“Dear God, you’ll swallow the moon,” Mary chided. “You’ll stay the night with me, tonight, and I don’t want to hear another word.”

Kitty had enjoyed a small taste of freedom since coming to Dunedin and didn’t want to lose her independence just yet. Kitty admired the women that owned the boutique. Mrs. Fitz had a matronly figure but she dressed in tailored finery showing her ability as a seamstress, while Madame le Roux wore the latest Paris fashions, and was known for her most remarkable ostrich plume hats. The two women were good teachers and had recognised Kitty’s talent early, and not given her the mundane tasks of picking up pins, hemming, or fetching and carrying for them. Instead, they had been giving her tasks suited to her ability, showing her uses for different textiles, and teaching her patternmaking and design. “But Ma, I have to ...”

Mary interrupted, "I have already sent the bell boy with a note to tell the boarding house you will be staying with me. Don't worry, as long as that thieving woman is paid, she won't mind in the least."

Kitty could feel her independence slipping away. "But I didn't bring any nightwear."

"Wear your petticoats to bed," Mary said. She was a woman of practicality. None of this fussy nonsense. Kitty's head was being turned by the seamstress Juliette le Roux; next she'd be wanting a different dress for every occasion for Heaven's sakes. "Have you..."

Guessing the question, Kitty interrupted, "Yes, I have been given the time off for the trial." She rolled her eyes, "Mrs. Fitz keeps asking me questions I can't or don't want to answer. She's a nosy old biddy." The tabloids would be full of the trial. Everyone in Dunedin had heard rumours, and they wanted more.

"Good, because I've told Cameron he can count on you to testify."

Kitty swallowed. She dreaded that. She hoped the reporters didn't write the whole transcript in the papers for everyone to read. What would people think? She was just starting to make a name for herself as a talented seamstress. Heaven forbid that the dress shop's reputation would be damaged by her association with the case. Resigned, Kitty removed her hat and gloves. There was no point in arguing with her mother, not when she had made up her mind.

They still hadn't spoken about the gaping wound Jim's loss had caused. Wanting to say so much more than she did, Kitty reached across and put her hand on her mother's shoulder. "Ma, I'm so sorry I wasn't there."

Mary sighed and patted the small hand resting on her shoulder. "What's done can't be undone, love. Best we fix what we can." Kitty's hand slid off Mary's shoulder as Mary

rose to her feet. Mary found her drawstring bag, opened it and drew out a small black velvet pouch. "I have something for you."

Kitty took the signet ring out of the pouch and stared in disbelief. The inscription read, *'Goodness and Kindness'*. Bewildered, Kitty raised her eyes to her mother's face. "This is Annie's ring."

"Yes, but Grace is too young to wear it, and since the bushrangers took yours, I want you to wear it until Grace is old enough. Your father would have wanted that." Mary looked down at the ring on her finger. Wanting to feel Jim close, she rubbed her finger across the engraving *'love remains'*.

Kitty slipped Annie's ring on her finger, the lump working in her throat threatened to choke her. Kitty's signet ring, the one her father had specially made her was inscribed with the words, *'Gentleness and Mercy'*. Sometimes in her nightmares, she replayed the attack and that terrible moment when she kissed William. She shook her head to chase away the ghosts. Da had rings made for each of them, Ma's said, *'love remains'*, Meg's said, *'Faithful and True'*, but Annie's ring was inscribed with the words, *'Goodness and Kindness'*. Annie was both good and kind, but Kitty felt neither. She had kissed William, and after he rejected her, she attacked him and deliberately tried to hurt him. No, there was nothing good, kind or merciful about her. She was a callous, cold-hearted fraud.

Her mother was carefully watching her expression, her cat-like eyes gleaming gold and green in the candlelight.

"Thank you, Ma," Kitty said, her voice a whisper. She put her hand on her heart. "I will take care of it for Grace, and I hope to honour Annie's memory by wearing her ring."

Mary hugged her youngest daughter tightly. "Ah, my wee darling, you are like her, but it doesn't stop us missing Annie every day, does it?" Mary let go and hastily wiped a tear

from the corner of her eye. Mother of God she was emotional these days, cried at the drop of a hat, she did. "Besides, it's a fair trade, I've given Grace your old rag doll," she told Kitty glibly.

Nostalgic, Kitty smiled, "Tilly will be happy not to be lying alone in the bottom of a trunk."

"Grace loves her dearly. Carts her baby everywhere."

Kitty was not good at keeping secrets and this one was a burden. "I've seen Mr. Burns about town."

Mary's eyes widened in surprise. "Have you now?"

Kitty nodded, remembering how he had attempted to convey his sympathy, but she had scratched him like a cat, wanting to see him bleed.

Mary frowned. "I was sure he'd go to the West Coast." She felt for poor William and knew he was devastated by Meg's betrayal. Curious to know more, Mary asked, "Did he speak to you?"

Avoiding her mother's eyes, Kitty bobbed her head and kept her eyes lowered.

"What happened?" Mary coached.

Kitty vividly remembered Pembroke's opulent sitting room and the look on William's face when he'd seen her, she wished she could erase it from her memory. "He said he was sorry to hear of Da's death."

Mary was silent for a moment, contemplating. Mary sighed. "I hope he finds happiness."

Kitty bit her lip. Meg may have broken his heart, but he'd scorned her as if she was nothing but a silly child, it felt like a festering wound that would not heal. She would have liked to unburden her heart to her Ma, but instead she chose not to mention it, believing it

would only colour her mother's view of William and wouldn't benefit anyone. Some things were better left unsaid. Let William Burns marry Georgiana Pembroke. She doubted Georgiana would make him happy. But, if that was the type of woman he wanted, then he deserved her.

Mary sat on the bed and removed her boots, tucking them under the bed. She rolled down her garters and stockings and wriggled her toes. Mary helped Kitty unhook the tiny hooks and eyes that ran the length of her back and then turned so Kitty could help her undoing the buttons on the back of her own dress. Kitty stood in her petticoats and helped as Mary handed them piece by piece to her to hang them tidily in the wardrobe. Mary removed her corsets enjoying the sudden rush of freedom. She opened her carpetbag and took out her nightdress. Threading her arms through the long-sleeved cotton nightdress she pulled it over her head, then took out her silver hairbrush and attacked her springy curls.

Kitty sat on the bed and unlaced her boots. Pulling them off she wriggled her stockinged feet. She glanced up. "I'm glad Father Whooley will be at court tomorrow."

"Aye," Mary pressed her lips in a thin line. "I'm not entirely sure if he came to support me, get the murderer to confess, or save the man's soul. Nevertheless, I'm glad of his company no matter the motive." Mary put the brush down and said, "I miss you terribly, Kitty. Come home. Come back with me."

Kitty expected this and steeled herself to resist. Initially, she'd run away to flee her infatuation but now found herself unable to return to the canyon because she enjoyed the freedom. Here, in Dunedin, she was more than just Mary Healey's daughter, she was a talented seamstress and becoming recognised as such. Back in Long Gully, Kitty never enjoyed an idle minute. Kitty worked hard here too at her apprenticeship, but working with fabrics, patternmaking and design was what she loved most. Going home to Long Gully

where the only glory was the drudgery of the household chores being done well was not enough.

Kitty balled her stockings and garters in her hand and tucked them inside her boots. "I need to stay here, Ma, and finish the apprenticeship. It's only another nine months." It occurred to Kitty she hadn't thought much about the cost while The Redemption had been doing well, but now with Da gone and Pat working the claim alone, sooner or later the gold would be worked out, and what then?

"We can afford it, can't we?" she asked, unable to hide the hopeful squeak in her voice.

Ignoring Kitty's question, Mary tutted. "I only agreed to three months," she reminded Kitty.

Immediately on the defensive, Kitty said, "I like it at the shop, Ma, they are kind to me, and I'm learning so much."

"They must be working you too hard, you look ill." She poked a finger at Kitty's waist. "You are skin and bones, girl. Does the woman at the boarding house not feed you?"

Kitty knew flattery was called for. "She is all right, but she can't cook like you, Ma." Kitty pulled a face. "Everything tastes like bilge water."

Mary clucked her tongue. "She can't be seasoning properly." Mary prided herself on her ability to cook a flavoursome dish. People came from all over the districts to savour her suppers. "That's another reason you should come home."

Deciding to leave it be, Kitty didn't reply but climbed into the bed and lay back, her head enveloped by the softness of the down pillow. Mary repositioned the candle on the side cabinet as she climbed in the other side.

Disgruntled, Mary remarked, "This bed is as hard as the hobs of Hell. I expected better for the money. Still, anything is better than being on that flamin' coach." The rolling motion of the coach had reminded her of being on the heaving ocean, and she hated it. The long journey from Ireland had been ghastly. She had been afflicted with endless seasickness, and they had tragically lost baby William on the way. After the voyage from Australia to New Zealand, she vowed so help her God, she was never going to set foot on another ship again as long as she lived. If she was ever to see family in Ireland again, she'd have to sprout wings and fly.

Mary snuffed the candle so that they were in sudden darkness. They could hear noises coming from the street below, a rowdy drunk singing a gravelly dirge at the top of his lungs, and the rattle of the night cart.

Kitty sighed softly. She wanted her mother to have a better opinion of Dunedin but thought it would be futile. Mary had always disliked the place. "How's Meg?"

"Nicely settled at Riverstones, and once a month Yankee rows her across the lake for Mass. She likes the station life more than she expected. She enjoys teaching the cook English, and the shepherds to read and write." Mary chuckled, "Meg says the Chinaman is teaching her his language but his English is infinitely better than her attempts at his lingo. But her biggest challenge is getting Yankee to sit still long enough to learn a thing or two."

Kitty digested this, then asked, "And is she happy?" William wasn't. He was far from happy, perhaps he'd find happiness with Georgiana Pembroke, but she doubted it.

"Never happier," Mary said wistfully. "Pity she didn't make up her mind sooner."

"I'm glad she's happy, Ma. Meg deserves to be cherished." Kitty wished she was. She was happy in her work but she still felt burnt by unrequited love. She had hankered after William Burns's attention, dreamed of him loving her, then to have him reject her and treat

her like she was a lovesick calf made her angry and bitter. She changed the subject, "Have you heard from Jack and Marnie? Have they arrived safely?"

"Nothing yet. I've sent a letter to the Post and Telegraph Office, hoping they will call in there eventually."

Kitty let out a long sigh. "So, they still don't know."

"No," admitted Mary, "not unless word has reached them by bush telegraph."

Poor Jack, if he'd made it to Jacob's River then he should have received Ma's letter by now, and he'd be devastated. Sadness washed over Kitty. The pain of losing Da twice cut deep. She liked keeping busy. It stopped her dwelling on the loss.

"I told him there's nothing he can do, and to stay put. I don't need Jack risking his neck coming back to Long Gully when Pat is managing well enough."

Kitty was surprised by that. Pat had a fondness for the drink and could disappear days at a time on a spree. He wasn't known for his reliability.

"Do you miss...?"

"Your Da?" Mary guessed. "Every day," she admitted. "There's always something to remind me, at times it's a sharp pain and other times it's a dull ache." She twisted the ring on her finger, she never took it off these days. Jim had wanted her to know, love remains. It was a message from the grave, and she clung to it.

"You loved him, didn't you, Ma?" A year ago, Kitty wouldn't have been sure of the answer. A year ago, she wouldn't have dared ask.

Mary's voice was thick as she said, "More than life itself." There were days after his passing so black she hadn't wanted to live, but she'd had to, for Grace's sake. The child was a reason to get up every morning. The babe needed her.

Mother and daughter lay in the darkness, aware of each movement, and the others breathing. Mary wiped away her silent tears. She must be strong for everyone's sake. She must be what they expected and not let her cracks show.

It wasn't long before Mary heard Kitty snoring. She smiled to herself. Kitty had small nasal passages and snored like an old sow, always had. Mary lay motionless, listening to Kitty's steady snore and trying to calm her mind. Her thoughts were scattering in all directions like a broken string of beads rolling across a wooden floor. She willed sleep to come quickly to oblivate the misery, for who knew what tomorrow would bring? She'd come to Dunedin to seek justice but she knew nothing would bring Jim back. Charlie swinging in the breeze wouldn't. Nothing could bring back the dead. She would go to him but he'd not return to her. Mary thought there was not much more her heart could take. She had lost baby William on the voyage to Australia. A small white bundle, he was tossed over the side, bobbing twice before slowly slipping beneath the waves, only to be remembered again in recurring bad dreams. Annie died in childbirth. Her beautiful daughter, Annie, had been violated by a constable of the Law, that wretched bastard was living in Dunedin now - God help him if they crossed paths while she was here. Constable Samuel Roberts was married with three legitimate children and wanted his bastard daughter to remain a secret. Mary had made him pay, and dearly too, a monthly payment to a solicitor's office in Dunedin to help with Grace's upkeep. Grace was lovely though. She gabbled away non-stop, and was a delight to all. The child had a look of her father about her but Mary purposely chose not to see it. And now, Jim. Just when she'd opened her heart up and learned to love again, she'd lost him too.

Kitty stirred, and rolled over, taking the bedclothes with her. Mary gripped a corner of the blanket and tugged. Kitty grunted in her sleep but didn't wake. Mary couldn't help

worrying about the hotel. She had left Smiley in charge of the tavern, and Pat. Smiley had not a tooth in his gummy head. He had once been a parson in the Old Country and folk said he was more honest than God himself, and he was almost as old as the Ancient of Days. Business had tapered off since the new rushes on the West Coast began but there was still enough custom in the area to make her pub profitable, and folks came for miles for one of her meals. She just hoped Pat didn't cut loose in her absence and bleed her stocks dry. He'd been a tower of strength since Jim's death, and she hoped he'd remain so and not go back to his whoring, drinking, gambling ways.

To help her sleep, she slowed her breathing and pictured sand trickling through the hourglass until finally, her eyelids grew heavy, but then the nightmares began. In the foggy haze of sleep, there was the sound of a drumbeat, and Mary watched as a prisoner climbed the gallows' steps to where the burly bull-necked executioner waited. The felon was tall and bearded, his hair dark, his hooded eyes fathomless. The priest slowly followed the prisoner up the steps, holding high the crucifix, and offering up prayers for the man's immortal soul. The three men stood on the gallows, the prisoner on the trapdoor while the priest and the hangman stood on either side, on one side immortal life and the other eternal damnation. The prisoner's hands were strapped behind his back so he couldn't try to stop the hangman's noose from doing its dastardly job. He was asked if he had any last words, his soulless eyes fixed on Mary, he merely shook his head.

The calico hood was placed over the prisoner's head and the noose's knot tightened and positioned. The father crossed himself and held his crucifix up as if pointing the way to God. The executioner put both hands on the lever and patiently watched the hands on the clock tick, waiting for the appointed hour. The clock sounded like a slow, steady heartbeat, then with a sudden tug on the lever, the trapdoor sprung open, and there came a rush of

wind as the body fell through the gaping hole. The condemned jerked and twisted, struggled to rise, his legs drawn up. He twitched several times, then was still. The ropes creaked and groaned as the limp corpse swung like a pendulum before her eyes. The body was lowered to the ground and the noose and hood removed. Mary gasped, Jim! The prisoner was Jim! They had killed Jim! She woke with a start. Beads of cold sweat glistened on her forehead. For a moment she couldn't remember where she was, then Kitty snored, reminding her they were in The Wains, she was in Dunedin, with her daughter, and she was there to see Charles Butler hang. She sucked in a shuddering breath and tried to rid herself of the ghastly vision. She crossed herself, telling herself it was a dream, just a dream.