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Memoirs of a Bastard Colonist

I

PADDINGTON 1874

by

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CHAPTER 1

Paddington, New South Wales

“Napoleon! Where are you going?” He must have caught sight of a rabbit and veered off into the undergrowth along the Old South Head Road. “Napoleon!” I could see the scrub moving but I couldn’t see my silly dog. We were late as it was; I didn’t have the time to play hide-and-seek, “Napoleon! Come back here at once!”

Following him across the drainage channel and into the waist-high grass, I let out an expletive that, had Mr Morrison heard, would have had me in my room and without my supper, “Damn!”

As though to mock me, a distant pair of laughing jackasses chimed in with their distinctive ridiculing calls; this only made me crankier.

“Napoleon!”

Then, as quickly as my recalcitrant dog loped into the bush, he loped back out, past me and onto the road and stood there grinning at me like the Cheshire Cat, swinging his tail nonchalantly from side to side.

I struggled back out and shook my finger at him, “Bad dog! You’re a bad dog, Napoleon. Don’t stand there with that look on your face. It’s not funny. We’re late.”

I was so intent on chiding my beloved dog that I didn’t see the young woman approach.

“I beg your pardon, young man. Would you be able to direct me, please?”

“Young man?” The impertinence! I swivelled to give this woman a piece of my mind, “How...”

The woman’s gaze darted to my shirt. “Oh, I do beg your pardon! I thought...Your short hair...your trousers...I thought...”

Her words floated about my head but missed my ears. She was beautiful. Not even the apparent horror she felt in mistaking me for a lad marred her exquisite features. Napoleon approved, too, wagging his tail eagerly.

I gathered my wits, yet flustered, “Ah, pardon, you said...?”

She smiled, my heart pounded, “I’m looking for the Morrison Family Hotel. Is it far from here?”

“Morrison...?” the name sounded familiar, “Morrison Family...! Of course! I live there! No, not far. We’re on our way home now, Napoleon and I. That’s Napoleon.”

“Nice to meet you, Napoleon,” and directed her conversation to him, “My name’s Sarah. Sarah Harper.” She turned to me, “Would you like to show me the way?”

“To where?”

Sarah’s smile radiated warmth and love; I was truly dumbfounded for the first time in my life. “To the Morrison Family Hotel.”

“Yes.”

“Is it this way?”

“Yes.”

She took the first steps toward my destination, home. I kept pace with her, as we ambled along, past the toll gate and along the barracks’ great stone wall, the urgency of my return completely forgotten.

“And what’s your name?” Sarah asked.

“Ah...”

“Or should I ask Napoleon?”

“Rebecca. Rebecca Davies.”

“Nice to meet you. May I call you Rebecca? I believe I’m a little older than you.”

“I’m seventeen!”

Sarah laughed with such gentleness I could have swooned then and there. “I must say you hold your age well.”

The next question popped out of my mouth before my brain could stop it, “How old are you?”

“I am twenty years of age and that’s a most impertinent question,” she chided, but in a most agreeable way.

It was only then that I noticed she was carrying a covered basket.

“Are you delivering wares to Morrison’s?”

“I’m delivering lunch to my husband.”

My heart sank, “Husband? You’re married?”

“When one has the former, it’s usually the consequence of the latter.”

“Oh.”

“You seem disappointed.”

“No. It’s just...I thought...um...I thought we could be friends, is all.”

“We can still be friends, surely.”

“Yes. Friends.”

We walked on, Napoleon trotting ahead, scouting for rabbits and rats, garnering a pat from a passerby now and then, me trying to work out what sort of fool I had made of myself and Sarah strolling on, sometimes giving me a sideways glance.

Something glistened around Sarah’s neck and caught my eye; I broke my awkward silence, “That’s a lovely locket you have there, Mrs Harper.”

“A wedding gift from my parents. It has a photograph of my husband on one side and myself on the other. And please call me Sarah, since we’re so close in age.”

Several carts passed us, carrying goods to and from the village of Paddington, now boasting some thirty or forty shops along the Old South Head Road. Morrison’s Family Hotel was one of those, established some twenty years ago to cater to the soldiers stationed at the Victoria Barracks, which we had now just passed as we began the steady incline to the top of the hill and the hotel.

The soldiers there were mostly good natured, at least, those who patronised Mr Morrison’s public house, where I served at the bar in the evenings. And business was good,

good enough for Mr Morrison to buy the adjacent plot and extend the building to cater for more travellers. The new hospital in Darlinghurst and the gaol there also tended to furnish us with guests who could not afford the higher rates in town.

“What does your husband do?” I enquired as honestly as I could, even though I felt quite jealous of him at that moment.

“He’s a carpenter. I believe he’s working on your hotel.”

At that moment, a skinny, redheaded youth appeared some fifty yards ahead and called out, “Rebecca Victoria Davies, you’re in big trouble!” which set off Napoleon with a frenzy of barks as he galloped up toward the youth.

The youth ran down and met Napoleon halfway, stopped to ruffle Napoleon’s ears as Napoleon excitedly jumped about, and then ran down to me with, “Where have you been? Pa’s beside himself.”

“Good. Then there’s two of him to do the work.” I was annoyed that he should interrupt me and Sarah.

“Who’s this?” he said, looking at Sarah and grinning from ear to ear.

“Mrs Sarah Harper may I introduce Patrick, the Bothersome, Morrison, son of the owner of the hotel.”

“How do you do?” was Patrick’s formal and snooty reply as he bowed and held out his hand, much to my irritation. He was barely two years my senior but such a child! Of course, we always had lots of fun together.

“How do you do?” replied Sarah graciously as she took his hand.

“Becky, you’d better get up there. You should have been back an hour ago. The tables need setting and the dishes need washing. And put on a skirt! You know how Pa feels about you dressing like me.”

With extreme reluctance I took my leave of Sarah. As Patrick and I trudged the remaining few yards to the hotel, Sarah called after me, “Perhaps I’ll see you tomorrow?”

I turned back, gave her a smile and a wave. That certainly lifted my spirits and gave me the energy to face the wrath of Mr Morrison.

The facade of Morrison's Family Hotel was of bricks rendered to look like sandstone blocks. It was an imposing structure, three storeys high and as wide as the block of land it sat on, buttressing up against the lower building on one side. On the other side, the lot Mr Morrison had just purchased, stood a wooden structure—or I should say, lean-to—and it was in the process of being demolished to make way for the extension.

Patrick raced ahead and disappeared into that lot while I, led by my faithful Napoleon, made my way along the narrow passageway between the two brick buildings and into the open courtyard at the back where the stables and coach house were. These were accessible from the back lane as well. The gate there was rarely closed, let alone locked.

My little room—the one I was relegated to when I was deemed to be inappropriate—was on the top floor and overlooked this courtyard and, even though my 'imprisonment' may have been ordained, I was able to easily leave by the stairs that lead down through the back verandas on each floor. This was a feature of which Mr Morrison was particularly proud: an alternative escape route should fire take hold.

On the ground floor, the hotel's kitchen also opened out into the courtyard and that's where I was heading, to my work and possibly, a severe reprimand for taking so long to return home.

And I was right. There, in the kitchen, stood Mr Morrison, his flaming red hair a few shades greyer than his son's, holding a clutch of rolled up papers, in deep discussion with an older man I had seen only twice before. He glanced up at me. I stopped dead in my tracks. He stopped, folded his arms and glared at me.

"Just how long does it take you to return two books to the library?" He demanded in his thick Yorkshire accent. I opened my mouth to offer a lame explanation but he stopped me, "No. None of your excuses. You stopped to look at more books, didn't you? How many books do you need? You have a hundred upstairs if you have one."

"But I've read them all and the library has—"

"No excuses, young lady. This should have been cleared up an hour ago." He was right, of course, the kitchen was a mess with the dishes from that morning piled up.

"But Napoleon ran into the—"

“And Napoleon should not be in the kitchen.” He looked sternly at Napoleon and pointed to the door, “Out!”

Napoleon obeyed and slunk out the door, turned and laid himself down across the threshold with a grunt and the most mournful look.

“And you,” Mr Morrison turned to me and pointed to the internal stairs that led to my living quarters, “Upstairs, skirt on, finish your work.”

“Yes, Sir.” Completely deflated, I turned toward the stairs.

“And Rebecca,” his tone changed to his usual, affectionate one, “A parcel came for you this morning.”

I couldn’t help but jump with joy. He stopped me from going any further, “No. The books have to wait until you’ve finished your work. Now away with you!”

I ran upstairs. New books! All the way from England. I could never fathom why Mr Morrison indulged me so. These new tomes arrived like clockwork, once a month, from the same bookshop in London, from ever since I could remember. The subject matter was diverse and always in keeping with my age at the time. History, geography, mathematics, philosophy; the last volumes were by the ancient Roman writers Suetonius and Pliny the Younger but my most favourite writer, so far, apart from Emily Brontë, was Lewis Carroll.

With the thought of new books as a reward, despite wearing a cumbersome skirt and petticoat, I took on the kitchen with vigour. Thank goodness I forsook the bustle and boned bodice; how do these modern women work encumbered so?

My thoughts, unbidden, turned to Sarah.

“Why are you smiling like that?” The disembodied voice was Patrick’s and he sauntered into the kitchen from the dining room with a pile of table cloths.

“Do you know any other way to smile?” I replied not looking up from my task of scrubbing the last of the pans.

Patrick dumped the linen in the basket and approached me, teasing, “You won’t talk to me like that when we’re married, Becky,” and prodded my side with his finger.

Of course, that made me jump and, of course, that started a water fight. Patrick quickly became soaked with dishwater but that didn’t deter him from tickling me mercilessly. How I wish I had worn that boned bodice! We ended up on the floor,

squirming, giggling, wrestling, tickling, struggling to be free until, exhausted by the sheer effort of laughing; we both collapsed and lay there, on our backs, catching our breath.

Patrick turned to me and most seriously asked, “You will marry me one day, won’t you, Becky?”

I thought long and hard, “One day.”

The summer days wore on; some were very hot, some were pleasantly cooler but all of them so humid. The occasional thunder storm came and went, frightening the horses and Napoleon, and the demolition work next door was complete. The new structure was progressing steadily.

During that time, I learned that the older man who had been with Mr Morrison in the kitchen that day was Mr Brendan Rourke, the builder contracted to erect the new extension. He was Irish, from Belfast, and had built up quite a business in the twelve years since he immigrated, taking on apprentices and young men who had found themselves in trouble either financially or with the police. He was a good Catholic man as was Mr Morrison and, I suppose, that’s why they worked so well together.

During that time also, I saw Sarah more often than not, delivering the midday sustenance to her husband. We usually sat together in the shade of a tree on her way home or, sometimes I would waylay her just as she gave the food to John. She seemed not to want to interrupt John with our chatter and always led me away, saying she had to hurry home.

The conversations we did have in private told me very little about Sarah other than she was born in Parramatta and that her parents had land holdings there. She and John moved to Sydney town to find work which, she said, was difficult to find back home.

Whenever it was available, Sarah took in dressmaking or needlework to supplement John’s income but, other than these details, she really didn’t talk much about herself or her husband. She always seemed to direct the conversation anywhere but there.

I also noted that Sarah wore the same dress every day she came to bring John his lunch. I thought it a little strange, she being a dressmaker, but then it didn’t really matter

because she was always clean and well presented; Sarah would have looked splendid even in sackcloth.

She was always happy to see me, or so it seemed, and I was always elated to see her. I can now admit that I had fallen deeply and completely in love with her.

One sultry day, a thunderstorm caught Sarah as she was about to return home. Dark thunder clouds roiled in from the west, pushing the clear blue skies out to sea. Sarah would never make it back to Darlinghurst in time to avoid the imminent down pour so I suggested she come up to my room to wait it out there. I was on my free time so the three of us, Sarah, Napoleon and I, raced up the back stairs as fat raindrops plopped around us. We made it to my room on the third floor just as the rain fell in sheets and thunder rolled through the heavens.

Shaking off the rain and laughing, Sarah took in my cosy little room, “This is lovely.”

I never thought of it as lovely. It was the attic. But it was cosy and comfortable and had everything I could possibly need or want.

It had two doors: one that came off the internal corridor that also led to the rooms of the other staff; and the other, the one we had just used, that led to the outside fire stairs. This secondary door was exceptionally useful for me to come and go as I pleased and without disturbing the rest of the household or, in fact, being noticed by them.

My room also has a large, north facing window that overlooked most of the buildings and far into the distance to the north shore.

I had lived in this room for all of my life and it contained all of my possessions and my life’s experiences, expectations and dreams. Most of those dreams came from my treasured collection of books, which I had carefully catalogued and cross-checked so I could find what I wanted quickly and easily. I now had five hundred and eighty-three, including those just received, and they ranged from the readers of my school years to a wonderful, new Chambers’s English Dictionary. The bookshelf filled an entire wall.

Sarah went to the window and exclaimed, “What a wonderful view!”

“That’s Port Jackson,” I explained, “And there’s Rushcutters Bay and the gentry of Rushcutter Valley. And from the front rooms you can see Botany Bay.”

Sarah twirled around and took in the room, “You have everything.”

“Everything I need.”

“And so many books! Have you read them all?”

“Yes. Some twice. Do you have books?”

She hesitated, “Yes, of course I have books,” and diverted, “How many do you have?”

“Five hundred and eighty-three.”

She laughed, “You have more than the free public library! How did you acquire so many?”

“Mr Morrison has them sent from London every month for me. But a lot of them were my mother’s.”

Sarah looked at me wistfully, “Your mother? Tell me about your mother.”

I sensed a longing in Sarah’s request; she never spoke of her mother or father and I was reluctant to pry, so I answered her honestly, “My mother was born in Wales, Cardiff, and was a governess. She was employed by the wife of some major stationed there to teach their three children. When he was posted here to the barracks in fifty-four, he brought his family, and my mother, with him.”

“And you?” Sarah stopped, puzzled, “You wouldn’t have been born then.”

“No, I was born in fifty-six.”

“A currency lass, like me.”

Normally, I would have objected to being called a currency lass, or a colonist, or a colonial but, coming from Sarah, it wasn’t an insult. “Yes, I suppose so,” I continued, “Mother said that education was the most important thing to have and from that, everything follows.”

There was sadness in her response, “That’s what they claim...”

I moved on quickly, “I love reading, anyway. That’s what I want to be, a teacher, like my mother. Maybe in China or someplace exotic. I want to see all the places I’ve read about.”

Sarah smiled at my enthusiasm, then asked, “What happened to your mother? Your father?”

“Mother passed away from consumption. Five years ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Rebecca.”

“It’s going to happen to us all,” I dismissed with a shrug, “I just hope that I don’t suffer the way she did. What about you, Sarah? Your parents?” I really wanted her to talk about herself and I hoped this would open the way.

She was gentle in her rebuff, “They’re both well. And your father?”

I hesitated; I was a little ashamed and embarrassed but I really couldn’t be blamed for it, “My father? I don’t know who he was,” but I quickly added, “Mother was not an immoral woman, Sarah. She was good and honest and she loved and cared for me and did everything possible for me—”

“Rebecca, I can see that she loved you. I can see, also, that Patrick and Mr Morrison are very fond of you. Do you think Mr Morris—”

“My father? No! Do I have red hair? Do I look even remotely like Patrick, I hope not!”

Sarah laughed—oh, how I loved her laughter, how I loved that I could make her laugh. I continued, “She never told anyone who my father was. Once she said to me that she made him a promise that she would never tell. She said she loved him deeply and he loved her but they could never be together. That saddened her but she said that I was the culmination of their love and that I was very much wanted and adored by my father.” I paused and then added, “Of course, that doesn’t alter the fact that I’m a bastard.”

Sarah almost choked on that last epithet. “Rebecca!”

I continued, “I was born in this very room, you know. In this very bed. The bedclothes have been changed since then, of course.”

Sarah laughed.

“Come, sit.” I led Sarah to the bed and we sat on the edge next to each other. I continued, “Mother said that, at the moment of my birth, a shooting star streaked across the night sky. She saw it through this very window. She said that was my lucky star, a good omen of a long and happy life and that it would protect me. I truly believe that my soul came to me on that shooting star.”

Sarah seemed horrified, “Does that mean that your soul will be taken when it reappears?”

I hesitated, “I never thought of it like that. You may be right, my soul just may be reclaimed upon its return.”

Just at that moment, a bolt of lightning flashed and thunder followed it almost immediately. Napoleon scrambled under the bed and Sarah and I jumped. We sat there momentarily stunned.

Sarah burst into laughter as did I, much relieved. I proffered, “Maybe that was God trying to tell me something.”

“Rebecca! You mustn’t blaspheme.”

I smiled at her religious directness and continued, “Anyway, I think Mother had a lucky star as well.”

“How so? She died young, didn’t she?”

“Yes, but she was cared for. When the major found out she was with child—me—he dismissed her. Couldn’t have that sort of scandal. Mr Morrison took her in. Mrs Morrison had just passed away leaving Mr Morrison alone with a new hotel and a two-year-old son, Patrick. Mother looked after the baby like he was her own and Mr Morrison looked after Mother while waiting for me to arrive. Once I was born, it was like we were a family.”

“But you address him as ‘Mr Morrison’.”

“I can’t call him ‘Pa’ because he’s not but he is as dear to me as a father could be. And as strict! Patrick’s like my big brother.”

“More like your fiancé. He’s very sweet on you.”

“I won’t be marrying Patrick. He’s not the one I’m in love with.” I couldn’t help myself but to look deep into Sarah’s eyes. She gazed into mine but her look was one of apology, of regret.

It wasn’t long before the storm passed through the heads and out to sea.

“I must go,” Sarah said regretfully, “Thank you for showing me your room.”

“You must show me yours,” I said in hope.

Sarah didn't reply but smiled and left. I watched her descend the rain soaked stairs with feelings I had never felt before.

It was now the end of March and autumn had set in. It may have been the weather or it may have been my imagination but, that day, Sarah appeared quite low in spirit.

I was sweeping the footpath outside the front door of the hotel, Napoleon dozing in the afternoon sun when Sarah emerged from the building site next door and hurried past me.

“Sarah!” I called as she sped by. I took a few bounding steps, followed by Napoleon, and caught up to her, “Didn't you see me?” Her pace didn't falter. I tenderly took hold of her elbow, “Sarah, what's the matter? Sarah?”

She stopped and looked at me and tried to smile. She looked so unhappy. “Oh, Rebecca, please forgive me. I really can't stop to natter today. Forgive me.” She gently prized herself from my grip and with an apologetic look to both me and Napoleon, sped down the hill toward Darlinghurst.

I was totally flummoxed. What had I done? I could think of nothing that would have caused offence. Bewildered and baffled, I turned to resume my sweeping duties when I caught sight of John standing at the edge of the building works looking at me and scowling. What had transpired between him and Sarah? What did she say to him that made him so sullen? I had not expressed to Sarah how I felt about her and I certainly had not enacted what I fantasised, for I desperately wanted to hold, caress and kiss her.

Napoleon noticed him, too, and barked once at him as though he were chiding John.

As we approached the front door, John turned and disappeared into the almost complete building.

That night, after the public bar closed and after the hotel guests had been fed and watered, the family and staff sat together, as usual, at the supper table. Mr Morrison took prime position at the head, young Patrick on one side of him and I sat opposite Patrick on the other. The other four positions were occupied by the hotel's permanent staff: housekeeper, upstairs maid, groom and cook. The position opposite Mr Morrison was empty; it was the

late Mrs Morrison's, Patrick's mother, who passed away a year before my own mother and only six years gone.

The conversation was always lively and convivial; Mr Morrison had a very good relationship with his staff, his family and generally most people, a trait that also sat well with Patrick. Tonight, after the strange incident with Sarah and John, I sat quiet and introspective, playing with my dinner.

Patrick noticed. "All right. Who's kidnapped Rebecca? The one sitting here is definitely an imposter!"

Mr Morrison added, "You are awfully quiet, young lady. Has something upset you?"

I wasn't going to say anything but, since it was brought up, I ventured, "Mr Morrison, what do you know about the carpenter, John?"

Mr Morrison raised an eyebrow in surprise, "John? Not much. Why do you ask? Has he done something to you?"

"No."

"He's strange," offered Patrick, "The way he treats his wife. I would never treat you like that, Becky."

I became very concerned, "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Sarah does everything to please him but he just treats her like... I don't know... Unrespectful."

I was so surprised by this that I couldn't ridicule Patrick for his misuse of the word. I silently resolved to find out more about John.

"What books did you receive yesterday, Becky?"

"Huh?"

Patrick aped, "'Huh?' Most eloquent, Becky. Books. What did you get?"

"Oh. A travel book on China and the Far East, *Old Kensington* by Anne Thackeray Ritchie, *Nancy* by Rhoda Broughton, and Mrs Beaton's *Book of Household Management*."

"Hah! That last one should be a boon to you, Becky. Does it explain how to do women's work in men's clothing?"

Mr Morrison warned, "Patrick..."

“Sorry, Pa,” but he still shot me a sassy grin.

The next day was a Saturday and always a busy one at the hotel: guests coming in to spend the weekend visiting their loved ones either in hospital or in gaol, end-of-working-week spendthrifts drinking their earnings away at the pub or couples taking an evening meal in the hotel’s renown dining room, thanks to our excellent cook, but I was determined to see Sarah before she arrived with John’s lunch.

After I rushed through my duties, I threw off my apron and headed for the kitchen door and stopped abruptly—an apple! I’ll bring her an apple! Grabbing one from the bowl, I raced out the door, through the passageway, followed closely behind by Napoleon, and down the Old South Head Road hoping to catch Sarah on her way up.

I saw her just before I reached the toll gate, “Sarah!”

Upon seeing my rapid approach, she bowed her head and continued her on her way toward me. Unusually, she was wearing a scarf draped over her head, wrapped about her neck and covering most of her face.

I skidded to a stop, panting, and Napoleon and I joined her on her trek back up the hill. “I brought you an apple,” and placed it in her basket.

Before I could utter another word, Sarah whispered, “I can’t stop and talk to you today. I have too much to do.”

This confounded me. She was earlier than usual and I had raced through my chores so I could talk to her. And she wouldn’t look at me. “Sarah,” I gently enquired, “what’s the matter? What have I done to offend you?”

“Rebecca, please leave. I can’t...I don’t want to speak to you.”

“Stop right there, Mrs Sarah Harper and look me in the eye when you say that!” My anger was fuelled by confusion. I took her by both arms and turned her toward me. “Now tell me!”

She shrugged me off, “Don’t!” and continued on her way defiantly.

I was completely bewildered and just stood there watching her walk away. A moment later, I was by her side, keeping pace with her. She glanced around her scarf at me, “Please don’t, Rebecca. Please go away.”

“Not until you tell me what I’ve done.”

I could see that she was rattled and nervy and that bullying her was not going to calm her any. I reached up and moved her scarf away so I could meet her eye to eye and gasped when I saw that her cheek was swollen and bruised. She immediately recoiled and pulled the scarf back over her face. Without hesitation, she uttered, “I tripped and fell onto the corner of the table. I’m all right. Thank you for your concern. Now please leave me alone,” and she scuttled off leaving me rooted to the spot speechless.

Even though I didn’t believe a word she was saying, I couldn’t believe what I was thinking. How could anyone hurt such a wonderful person? What on earth could she possibly have done to deserve that? She was so gentle and loving. My heart felt heavy; I felt helpless. I needed to find out what was causing her distress but, in my heart of hearts, I knew.

I followed Sarah as she made it to the building works and barely responded to the greetings of the various masons, bricklayers and plumbers as she passed through to where her husband was chiselling out a rebate on a timber floor joist.

I watched and listened, unseen by John or Sarah, as I busied myself pretending to need the bits of discarded timber I was collecting.

Rourke, the builder, greeted Sarah as she passed, with a smile and his musical Irish accent, “Ah, the lovely Mrs Harper. Good day to you.”

Sarah smiled and replied summoning as much cordiality as she could, “Good day to you, Mr Rourke. John’s lunch.”

“Of course, my dear lady, we’re just about to break now.”

John downed his hammer and chisel and met Sarah, “About time. Are you all right?”

Sarah didn’t respond as John peered under the scarf at her bruise. “You should mind yourself. Did you tell him?”

Sarah shook her head, “He wouldn’t listen. He made me promise—”

John grabbed Sarah’s arm, “What? What did you promise?”

With this, Rourke turned and glared at John. John assured him apologetically, “It’s all right, Mr Rourke, it’s all right,” and returned to Sarah quietly but menacingly, “What did you promise McDonald?”

“He would have it by Friday...Five...John, he wouldn’t...you’re hurting me—”

“Then you can go and un-promise him.” He grabbed the contents of the basket, as well as the apple meant for Sarah, and turned his back on her.

She was visibly shaken and it was all I could do to not run to her and console her or to not whack that son of a bitch over the head with his own hammer.

As Sarah left, I saw Rourke approach John and ask, “What happened to the money I advanced you, Johnno?”

I didn’t care for what ‘Johnno’ had done with the money; I cared for what Johnno had done to Sarah.

Sarah had practically run away from John and, instead of turning to go back down the hill, she turned the other way and continued up the road and around the bend. Napoleon and I pursued her and found her in a paddock, sitting on a tree stump, weeping.

We approached tentatively, not wanting to distress her further. “Sarah...”

She looked up at me, her beautiful eyes swollen and red, her tears glistening in the sunlight. “What am I to do?” she sobbed.

My heart broke seeing her so anguished. I went to her and put my arms around her. She didn’t resist, instead leaned into me and rested her head on my shoulder. My embrace tightened and it seemed to comfort her, “I don’t know what to do, Rebecca.”

“Tell me. I will help you.”

Sarah’s reactive snort indicated that nothing I could do would help. I persisted, “Why don’t you leave?”

“We did leave but the troubles simply came with us.”

“I mean leave him. John.”

She looked at me, desperation lined her face, “And go where? Do what? I have no money, my sweet child.”

“I’ll take care of you. You can live with me at the hotel.”

She smiled a piteous smile, “If only...”

“We could leave. Go abroad. China. I have this book—” I was desperate to help her.

“I can’t leave. John needs me. He does love me. It’s just when he...”

“Do you love him?”

Sarah hesitated.

“I love you, Sarah.”

What I thought would have shocked her only made her smile. “And I love you, Rebecca, but it can never be.”

“Why not?”

She looked deeply into my eyes, into my soul. What I saw in hers was pain. She cupped her hand to my cheek and drew near. Without hesitation, our lips met in tender union. A warmth overcame me; my body relaxed and I surrendered to the most glorious sensation I had ever felt.

She drew back and looked at me, “I must go. Everything will work out fine, you’ll see.”

I slowly shook my head; I didn’t believe it could but prayed it would for her sake.

She rose and made her way back to the road.

“Sarah,” I called to her, “I’ll bring you the book on China.”

CHAPTER 2

The Push

That evening was as expected for a Saturday night. The public bar was filled with commercial travellers staying with us in the hotel, off duty soldiers from the Victoria Barracks down the road, gentlemen in their Saturday night finery, and some menial workmen enjoying a few pints before returning home to their respective wives. All were enjoying the company of their grouped compatriots as Patrick, Mr Morrison and I served at the bar and cleared the empties from the tables.

It was Patrick's task to draw the beers while I collected the empties from the tables scattered about the commodious room; sometimes we swapped roles.

Mr Morrison's job was to take care of the 'exclusive clientele' as he called them but they were, in reality, his old cronies from Mother England with whom he loved to chinwag.

As usual, fresh oysters from the fish market at sixpence per dozen were on the scant bill of fare and, with a pint of beer, were always popular and sold out no matter how many were bought in.

My livery for serving in the bar fitted my mood perfectly: black; black skirt and bodice with white cuffs, collar and apron.

After the distressing revelations of that afternoon, I was not in the mood for joviality or the usual raucous banter between me, the soldiers and Patrick. Patrick had noticed and didn't make any comment but I was aware that he kept a close watch on me.

During the course of the afternoon, I had made numerous excuses to go to the building site just to peer at John and to wonder how he could do what he'd done. I didn't like him before then because he was married to Sarah and now I loathed him because of what he had done to her. On one or two occasions, he had seen me staring at him and returned my contemptuous look.

The patrons making the loudest noise tonight—and every night—were the six soldiers from the barracks, led in sheer volume of sound by Corporal Roberts, a ruddy-complexioned monolith of a man from Ulster and, in effect, the only regimental soldier amongst the lot of infantry volunteers that now occupied the barracks. He had been with the 18th Royal Irish Regiment but decided to stay when the regiment was ordered back to England now some four years gone.

It had been quite busy and I longed to be with Sarah but, with so many patrons coming and going, my absence would not only be missed but frowned upon by Mr Morrison. So, I carried on with my duties and, empty tray in hand, headed for the Roberts cacophony.

Roberts was well into his cups but still *compos mentis* as he heralded my arrival with a loud and discordant alternative rendition of *Oh! Susanna*: “Oh! Rebecca, don't you cry for me, I've come from old Vic Barracks with a crooked broken knee.”

I wasn't in the mood to join the deafening laughter that followed, instead loaded my tray with the dozen or so empty mugs and asked, “Six more, Corporal?”

“Yes, my sweetest of sweets, and oysters.”

“Sorry. All gone.”

I turned to fill his order from the bar and, in the furthest corner, in semidarkness, slung carelessly into his chair was John, slowly drinking his ale and staring at me. His eyes followed me to the bar. At that moment, I wished I were a man so that I could have beaten him senseless.

“What'll it be? Becky?” Patrick followed my gaze to John. “He's drunk.”

“If he thinks he scares me like he scares Sarah, he's mistaken.”

“Becky, you'd best leave them alone. No good interfering between a man and his wife.”

“He hit her.”

“Maybe she did something to deserve it.”

“Patrick! Since when is it all right for a man to strike a woman?”

“No, I didn’t mean...Becky...”

“Six beers for the Corporal!” I was seething with rage.

Patrick concentrated his efforts to filling the order as I unloaded the tray onto the counter. I didn’t hear or see John’s approach and was startled when he stood over me and slurred threateningly, “You dirty little tom. She’s mine. Go near her again and I’ll kill the both of you.”

His foul breath was hot on my face, “You don’t scare me, you bastard.”

He laughed and almost lost his balance, “Look who’s calling me a bastard!”

That drew both Patrick’s and Corporal Roberts’ attention. Patrick warned from behind the bar, “Watch your mouth, mate!” as the corporal grabbed John’s shoulder and spun him around to face him, “You got a problem with her, boyo, you come see me, right?”

John sneered and pushed the corporal’s hand off. He shot me a menacing look then staggered toward the door.

We hardly had a moment to compose ourselves when the front doors were flung open and six hard faced men pressed their way in. John attempted to push his way through them but he was buffeted from one to the other until he found the door and stumbled through it as they laughed at him contemptuously.

All eyes were now on those six men, strangers to me and most, as they stood inspecting the room and its occupants. All was deathly silent.

In front was a wiry, scarfaced man of about thirty years and not much taller than me. His malevolent smirk did nothing to endear him nor did the company he was with, all attired in a similar fashion: bell-bottomed pants of varying shades of dirty, no waistcoats, very short black paget jackets, some buttoned up because they actually still had buttons, shirts with no collars and each with a distinctive gaudy neckerchief around his bare neck. High-heeled boots gave each a little added height but certainly no class.

Mr Morrison had become aware of this intrusion and he, too, watched on with concern.

I looked to Corporal Roberts who was eyeing them warily, “Who are they?” I quietly asked.

“The Push,” was his equally quiet reply. The corporal looked to his fellow soldiers who stood up, ready, as Corporal Roberts approached the apparent leader of the group, “Now, lads, this is a respectable place. No trouble.”

The leader, Jeremiah Hickson, smiled broadly, baring his crooked, yellowed teeth, “Tether your horse, Captain, it was him what assaulted us.” His cohorts snorted with derision.

“What are you doing here in Paddington, Hickson? You rats deserting the Suez Canal?”

“That’s unkind, Major, we’re cut real deep, aye, boys?”

“This isn’t the kind of grog shop you’re used to. We won’t put up with any trouble. Hear me?”

“We just want some refreshment is all, Colonel, Sir. Disposing of garbage has made us real thirsty, like.” The private joke brought laughter and snickers from the group standing with him, “Them Forty Thieves is now but twenty.”

I turned to Patrick, “Forty Thieves?”

“A rival larrikin gang in Surry Hills.” He quietly explained.

Corporal Roberts gave each a stern look and addressed Hickson, “No trouble. Got it?”

Hickson stood to attention, clicked his heels and saluted, “Aye, aye, Admiral!”

With a final warning glance, Corporal Roberts returned to his table and the six soldiers resumed their seats, keeping a watch on the Push while Hickson approached the bar. His cluster of reprobates peeled off and took up the table that John Harper had just vacated. I stood there, mesmerised.

Hickson fronted the bar near me – he stunk of sweat and horse manure as most honest carters would at that time of day but it was a certainty that his odour was not earned honestly.

Fishing for coin in his jacket, he looked at Patrick, “Six of your finest whisky, barman.”

Without moving, Patrick responded, “Six shillings.”

“And they call me a thief!” and countered and tossed the coins onto the bar.

“You said the finest,” was Patrick’s retort as he scraped the coins up and moved off to fill the order.

Hickson turned to me, looked me up and down and asked, “You all right, Miss?” All I could do was nod; this man was dead-ugly and his breath matched his body odour. He continued, “You’re a comely lass. We could use someone like you.”

I could see Patrick keeping his eye on Hickson and Patrick had a look on his face I hadn’t seen before, one of steely determination.

Hickson carried on, “What’s your name, lass?”

I suddenly found some gumption, “Rebecca. Rebecca Davies. And yours?”

“Jeremiah Hickson, at your service, Miss Davies.” It was his mocking tone that made my hair stand on end.

Patrick returned with six glasses of Chivas Regal on a small tray, “Six of the best,” and pushed the tray toward Hickson.

The smile Hickson gave Patrick was most disconcerting as it was more of a threat than a thank you. He picked up the tray, looked at me and winked, indicating Patrick, “If ever you want a real man, lass, look me up. Harrington Place. The Rocks,” and joined his minions at the corner table just as Corporal Roberts approached. He had become concerned as he could see that I was shaken.

He cautioned, “You shouldn’t front those larrikins, Rebecca, they’re trouble.”

I turned to him, confused, “He said he could use someone like me. What did he mean?”

“As a lure. To entice drunks and sailors into the Suez Canal and rob them. It’s a bad place, Harrington Place. Keep well clear of it. And them.”

Eleven o’clock finally chimed as Mr Morrison called, “Last drinks, gentlemen. Closing time. Drink up.”

I was dead-tired and desperately needed some fresh air, silence and solitude so I made my excuses to Mr Morrison and left by the back door. My faithful Napoleon rose

from his nap and greeted me with a wagging tail. I intended to go upstairs and change into my trousers and go and see if Sarah was all right. There would be a price to pay in the morning because of lack of sleep but I was willing to pay it to see no harm had come to her.

Before I could get to the back stairs, I saw two men hunched over a crumpled figure on the ground at the building site. Napoleon's growl was low and stopped as soon as I ordered, "Shh!"

One of the men was Mr Rourke and the other must have been one of his workers; they were attempting to raise the figure on the floor.

"Up you get, lad. Come on, time to go home," Mr Rourke urged as he and his worker pulled up the prostrate man, "Wake up. Johnno, your wife's probably worried sick about you."

He was pulled up to standing position and instead of being thankful, John grumbled and fought to free himself from their assistance, "Get away from me!"

"All right, laddie, we're only trying to help."

"Let go!" With that, Mr Rourke let John go. He stumbled and righted himself then staggered through the almost complete building to the road.

The youngster with Mr Rourke commented, "He's an ungrateful bastard, that one."

"Aye, that may well be but he's fighting many a demon, poor bloke."

"*'Poor bloke' indeed,*" I thought. He'd brought it all upon himself and blamed the world for it. I decided to follow the 'poor bloke' home, uncomfortable as I was in my dress but I kept to the shadows and was unseen by him or passersby, few as they were. Napoleon kept close to me skulking along, his wolf-like instincts for the hunt showing through.

As Harper became steadier on his feet, he became more vocal and aggressive and shouted to anyone and to the world, "Fuck you, you son of a mongrel bitch! Fuck you too, you cunt! Bloody swiving molly! Piss on you all...GOD! WHY HAVE YOU DONE THIS TO ME?"

I almost pitied him but he was showing enough of that for himself that it left no room for mine.

Suddenly, a hand on my shoulder jerked me backward.

"What the hell are you doing, Becky?" Patrick uttered in the loudest of whispers.

“Let me go, Patrick.”

“You want to die? Worse still, you want Sarah to die? I heard what he said to you.”

“He’s drunk and he’s full of rage. God knows what he’ll do.”

“He’ll probably collapse unconscious in bed. Come home now or I’ll tell Pa.”

“Patrick—”

“No. Don’t get involved. She will suffer if you do. We’ll find a way to help her—if she wants our help.”

He was right. That threat from John was real. I didn’t care what happened to me but I didn’t want to be the cause of any more harm coming to Sarah. “All right, Patrick, but you will help me find a way of helping her, right?”

“Yes. Now come home.”

My heart sank. I prayed to God that He would look after her and keep her safe from her abusive drunkard of a husband.

Unaware that Rebecca had been following him, John lurched from one foot to the other, stumbling and weaving down the dimly lit Old South Head Road toward his home in Palmer Lane, a narrow back street of Darlinghurst, continuing with his barrage of expletives and curses, mostly garbled and unintelligible.

The ‘home’ he and Sarah shared was the upper floor of a ramshackle building that had been a large stable and loft when it was constructed about forty years earlier. The ground floor had been the stable but was now used as a storage house for unused and unwanted furniture by the owner of the property.

The upper floor they occupied, the former loft used to store bales of hay, had been converted to very primitive and basic accommodation and the whole structure was destined for demolition soon. The very low rent reflected this.

This was the only building that fronted the lane. The rest of houses along that narrow laneway were far newer, fronting onto Palmer Street and backing onto the lane.

The rickety flight of wooden stairs that led up to their home was held together by rusty nails and chicken wire, just barely attached to the side of the house. Arriving at the

bottom of the stairs, John braced himself on the balustrade, waiting for the world to stop spinning.

“Highland prick bastard...” he mumbled, hauling himself up one step at a time. Misplacing a foot, he fell onto the rough hardwood treads, “Fuck...Fuck, fuck, FUCK!” he yelled. He righted himself and mounted the stairs on all fours mumbling, “Mine...She’s mine!”

Inside the hovel she called home, Sarah stood peering through the window down at John. Fear and apprehension caused her breathing to become shallow. Wringing her hands, she took up her position at the stove, stirring the thin stew she was able to put together with the meagre provisions she had available.

Their ‘home’ comprised one room. The floorboards were uneven, some rotten in places, some missing, the most dangerous areas were covered with sheets of embossed tin, salvaged from old derelict buildings set for demolition. There was no ceiling; bare rafters and posts held up the corrugated iron roof.

One end of the room was curtained off. This was the bedroom, it being made up of an old double bed with clean but tatty bedclothes and a small chest of three drawers topped with a washbasin.

In the middle of the room stood a small wooden table and two mismatched chairs. A place was set for John. Shelving along one wall served as the pantry.

The cast iron wood stove that Sarah was now standing at was twice her age. She stirred the stew, dreading the moment John would enter.

She tried, she reassured herself, she really had tried hard to convince Mr McDonald. She tried to please John, to be a good wife, to support him...to love him.

The door burst open and swung hard against the wall, startling Sarah. John clumped in barely able to keep his balance and made his way to Sarah. She shrunk back as he reached over her to the shelf and pulled out a half empty bottle of rum, alarming Sarah further, “John, should you be—”

He turned to her and raised his hand, “Don’t tell me what to do!” Sarah recoiled and John reconsidered his response. Instead, he stumbled to the nearest chair, flung himself into it and guzzled from the bottle.

Sarah knew what it was like when John became so drunk; it had happened so many times before. It was best that she kept her own counsel.

She turned to the stove and ladled out a portion of stew for John very aware of his intense scrutiny.

“Did you speak to that Scotch bastard?” John’s words were like a death knell; she knew what was to come.

“I asked you a question. Did you speak to him?”

Barely a whisper escaped Sarah, “He said Friday, five o’clock.” and she waited for the expected.

John flew out of his chair, grabbed Sarah and spun her around to face him. He was enraged and uncontrollable, “WHAT DID I TELL YOU?” He slapped her face hard, “NOT FRIDAY!” and slapped her again and again sending her reeling, hitting her head on the corner of the table. She fell to the floor, clutching the bleeding gash to her brow, crying in pain and in fear.

John staggered to her enraged...confused...dismayed...anguished and dropped to his knees, gathering her in his arms, “Sarah...Sarah...I’m sorry. Sarah...Why do you disobey me? You make me do this...”

I couldn’t sleep that night worrying over what John may have done to Sarah. Patrick insisted that John probably had been unable even to get up the stairs and probably had slept under them instead.

This hadn’t allayed my fears or concerns and I rose very weary the next morning not savouring the normal Sunday morning’s chores of helping Cook prepare breakfast for our guests and then attending Mass. Mr Morrison, Patrick, all our staff members and I were all Roman Catholics.

I knew that Sarah worshipped at the Sacred Heart in Darlinghurst, where we used to go but, since the newly built St Francis here in Paddington was inaugurated, Mr Morrison insisted we join this congregation to show our support. I was desperate to know that Sarah was well and suggested we attend the Mass at the Sacred Heart, to no avail.

I could see Patrick was unhappy with me and my suggestion but kept his tongue still – until we were on our way to church. He took my arm and slowed his pace. When the group was a few paces ahead of us, he let his tongue loose, “What are you thinking you can do, Becky?” he began, “Didn’t you hear what he said he would do if you kept company with Sarah? What’s the matter with you? I know you have a special friendship with Sarah but it will pass. It’s just a girlish infatuation—”

I pulled my arm out of his grip, “Oh! And you know all about ‘girlish infatuations’, do you?”

He took my arm again and stopped me, “Becky, I don’t want anything to happen to you—”

“And I don’t want anything to happen to Sarah. Let me go!”

“No. Becky—”

“And you said you would help me save her from that brute. I want to go and see that she’s all right!”

Mr Morrison turned to see what the kerfuffle was, “You two arguing on a Sunday?”

“No, Pa, we’re chatting.”

“Come along, then, no more chatting.”

Patrick looked at the determination in my face and gave a defeated snort, “All right. After Mass, we’ll go together.”

“You don’t have to come.”

“You’re not going alone—”

“Patrick! Rebecca! Stop that chatting now!”

Well, Mass was tedious as was our new Reverend Father and his hellfire and brimstone sermon, especially since all that my heart held right at that moment was murderous intent. I couldn’t have got out of there quick enough, barely genuflecting and splashing holy water in a rough semblance of the sign of the cross.

Patrick was on my heels, “Wait. Wait!” He grabbed my arm again.

“Stop doing that!” I protested, “What do you want?”

“You can’t just barrel up there like the Mad Woman in the Attic.”

He caught me off guard; I didn't know he'd read Jane Eyre, "What do you suggest then, Mr Rochester?"

I caught him off guard, "Well, at the very least you acknowledge that we'll be married," he retorted and continued, "I suggest *I* go and see if Sarah's all right—which she will be—with the excuse that Pa wanted to know something about the panelling in the new place. Does that sound feasible?"

"No," I mocked, "Harper's not smart but he's not stupid, either."

"Well, the only other choice is none. You're not going and I'll make sure you don't even if I have to tell Pa. And he won't be pleased with you at all."

Neither of us heard Mr Morrison and the rest of the staff approach, "What won't please me, Patrick?"

Patrick and I were both startled. Patrick stammered, "Pa...Nothing, Pa...Becky, ah, wants to wear her trousers for the rest of the day."

Mr Morrison looked at me, "Is that so, young lady?"

Patrick replied on my behalf, "I told her it wouldn't please you."

Mr Morrison was suspicious, "Hmmm," and walked past us, "Come along then, time to help Cook prepare luncheon."

Patrick and I exchanged glaring looks and followed the troupe back to the hotel.

The time couldn't come quickly enough for me. Luncheon was over and done with and Patrick and I were on our break until dinner. I did change into my trousers and donned a plain shirt, jacket and boots, topping it off with an old cabbage tree hat just in case it rained.

Patrick met me and Napoleon at the bottom of the back stairs and we hurried off together, through the back lane and toward Palmer Street and on to Palmer Lane. I was pleased to know that Patrick was actually concerned with Sarah's fate—perhaps not as much as I was—but he was a fair and just young man and he cared. He cared about me, about Sarah and, generally, he cared about people. He would make some young woman a wonderful husband.

The streets were busy with families and courting couples on their Sunday afternoon promenades, going to and coming from Moore Park and its sports and entertainments, even

though it was a little chilly. Those foolhardier took to the dangers of the Lachlan Swamps for their adventures or trysts.

When we reached Palmer Lane, Patrick stopped and looked at me earnestly, “Becky, you wait here. I will go up and see that she’s all right. You wait here, all right? Promise me.”

With much reluctance, I nodded my head.

Patrick hurried halfway up the lane to the stairs and turned to look at me, possibly for encouragement but most likely to make sure I hadn’t moved. He then disappeared up the stairs and out of my sight.

I stood backed up against a paling fence, nervously fidgeting with Napoleon’s ears and apprehensively looking about. I was in a bad position should Harper appear around the corner. How would I explain my presence? Certainly nothing to do with the wainscoting as Patrick had schemed.

After a few long minutes, Patrick returned. His look of mystification told me no one answered his call.

“Maybe they’ve gone to visit her parents,” Patrick offered, “You said they lived in Parramatta?”

“Maybe.” But I didn’t believe it.

“I knocked several times and looked through the window. I couldn’t see anyone in there, no movement.” He looked at my worried grimace, “It’ll be fine, Becky, you’ll see. Let’s get back before Pa notices.”

We started on our way back except for Napoleon who stood statue-like staring toward the stairs.

“Napoleon,” I called, “Heel, boy.” He gave one sharp bark, turned and followed Patrick and me.

Patrick commented, “You know, for a carpenter, it should be easy for him to take care of those stairs. They’re downright precarious.”

I spent another restless night, tossing and turning, worrying about Sarah, wondering what I could possibly do to protect her, where we could run away to.

My eighteenth birthday was coming around and I was aware that my darling mother had left a small sum of money in Mr Morrison's care until I came of age. Perhaps that would be enough to take me and Sarah away from these problems and start a new life together, perhaps in Queensland, perhaps in Victoria. The discovery of gold there made it a very hectic and disorganised place and one in which we could easily find anonymity and refuge.

These were the hopes and plans I had as I rose that Monday morning.

The new extension to the hotel was almost complete so it meant that very soon Sarah would no longer deliver Harper's midday meal to him and I would no longer see her and spend the wonderful hour or so with her before she had to return home.

I eagerly anticipated her arrival that day, if only to make sure she had not been mistreated by Harper.

The time of her usual appearance had now come and gone and I was beside myself with worry. It was no use talking to Patrick, he would only make more excuses and offer probable reasons for her nonarrival. I didn't want to hear excuses or reasons, I wanted to see Sarah. And I didn't want Patrick to stop me so, when everyone was busily occupied serving the guests their luncheon, I slipped out the kitchen door, into the back courtyard and through the passageway to the front of the hotel. Napoleon, my shadow and protector, as always, followed me.

We waited on the footpath, scanning the distance for Sarah but to no avail.

"Damn the consequences," I thought; I resolutely entered the new extension where Mr Rourke was inspecting the finishing touches with two of his workers. Napoleon stood by my side and peered into the distance, the hackles on his back erect. In the corner of the room, in shadow, we could see Harper sweeping shavings and offcuts into a pile.

Mr Rourke saw me and greeted me, "Young Miss Rebecca, how can I be of assistance to you this lovely day?"

"Has Mrs Harper been today? With Mr Harper's lunch."

"No, my sweet, Johnno's brought his own today."

This news momentarily stunned me. The worst images flashed through my mind, “Ah... are you sure?”

“As sure as any culchie with two eyes and half a brain can be sure, Missy.”

Napoleon growled; I looked up to see Harper staring at me with such hatred and intensity it made me shiver. At that moment, I loathed him. I wanted to say things, do things, but I seemed rooted to the spot and dumbstruck.

Mr Rourke’s general announcement broke the tension, “Lunch break, boys,” then to me, “If you’ll excuse me, Miss, I have an errand to run.”

Suddenly, it was just Harper, Napoleon and me.

Harper took a few steps toward me, his eyes never leaving mine, and picked up his tiffin box. He moved a few steps closer to me, offering his meal and sneered, “Want to share?”

Napoleon growled.

I knew what Harper meant. “No,” I said decisively.

“And neither do I. KEEP AWAY!”

Napoleon reacted fiercely to Harper’s shout with a barrage of angry barks and snapping lunges.

Harper struck out with his foot, “Mongrel!” and, with a kick to Napoleon’s abdomen, sent him flying, “Keep that animal away from me.”

“You’re the animal!” I yelled as I collected my whimpering Napoleon and comforted him.

“Next time, I’ll kill it!”

“You don’t deserve Sarah.”

“And you’ll never have her!” He turned, gathered the rest of his belongings and marched outside leaving me with Napoleon cowering with his tail between his legs.

I was not going to let this bully get the better of me. I knew what he was capable of doing but I was not afraid of him. I was nowhere near as strong as he was but I was infinitely smarter and that would be the way to save Sarah. But I needed to know that she was not harmed.

Napoleon's ribs were sore but not broken and after I carried him up to my room, I changed into my workman's outfit, collected the book, which I had carefully wrapped in brown paper and tied with string, and headed off to see Sarah.

Harper would be on site until about five so I had a few hours. I would explain and apologise to Mr Morrison and Patrick later; it was easier to do that afterward than to get permission beforehand.

It didn't take me long to get to Palmer Lane, running most of the way. When I reached the bottom of the staircase, Patrick was right, they were rickety and dangerous and why wouldn't Harper take the time to repair them?

I climbed them carefully and, reaching the top, looked around. This place was as deserted on a working day as it was on the day of rest; no one around. It must be eerily dark and foreboding at night, I imagined.

I turned to the closed door and knocked.

No answer.

I knocked again a little louder.

Still no answer.

I went to the window and peered in. It was dark and there was no movement.

"Sarah," I called quietly, "Sarah, it's me, Rebecca. I have something for you."

It was too quiet and it worried me, "Sarah—"

I heard the bolt to the front door slide and the door open slightly. I turned to it and spoke softly through the crack, "Sarah, it's me, Rebecca—"

"Rebecca, please go away."

"I have something for you."

"I really can't see you."

"Please let me in. I'll only be a minute. I promise."

"Rebecca..."

I could hear by her tone that her resolution was waning, "I promise."

The door slowly swung open just enough for me to sidle in.

The room was dark even so, I was taken aback by the sheer poverty of possessions the Harpers displayed. I felt a deep sympathy for Sarah and her situation. She was always

so cheerful and buoyant when we were in each other's company. She had never made any reference to her desperate circumstance.

Sarah stood in the penumbra of the room. I shook off the feeling of despair I felt for her and took a few steps toward her, "Sarah, I have this for you."

As I drew nearer, I was shocked to see her bruises and swollen forehead and blackened eye and a small weeping gash on the ridge of her brow. "What happened?" I said in complete horror, "and don't tell me you tripped and fell and hit your head on the table."

Sarah smiled with irony, "That is what happened, I did fall and hit my head on the table."

"What made you fall?" I asked angrily.

She hesitated and, as usual, changed the subject, "You said you had something for me?" she gently asked.

I knew what must have caused her to fall and let it go – for now. I proffered the paperwrapped parcel.

She took it and tenderly unwrapped it, "This is the first gift you've given me."

"Apart from the apple."

She smiled at that and upon removing the last of the wrapping, smiled even more brilliantly, "Oh, my dear Rebecca, a book on China. It's lovely. Thank you."

"I thought you could read up on China and decide where you'd like to go."

She looked at me puzzled.

"I'll be getting my small inheritance soon and I want to take you as far away from here that it will take us."

She collapsed into a chair; tears welled in her beautiful, sad eyes, "That would be impossible."

"Nothing's impossible, Sarah, nothing." I was at her knees, clasping her hands, "We are young, we are strong, we will have funds and we will have a plan. Nothing can stop us, you'll see."

"Rebecca—"

“I promise you this, my darling Sarah, I will protect you with my dying breath. Nothing will harm you ever again. We will be together for the rest of our lives. Believe me. Trust me. Please.”

She looked earnestly into my eyes and gave that piteous smile I had learned to mean that she believed that I believed in the impossible.

I reached up to her and kissed her mouth. It was a comforting kiss that was reciprocated and it quickly turned into an expression of our passion and love for each other. With immense regret I broke the kiss, apologising, “I must go. Mr Morrison will annihilate me when I return.” I rose and went to the door.

“Keep safe, my love,” she implored.

“And you read that book,” I replied, “I love you.”

I literally ran back to the hotel, up the stairs to my room, changed back into my morning livery and made sure Napoleon was all right.

The kitchen was still abuzz, now with clearing the luncheon dishes and with Cook baking the teatime delicacies.

Patrick stood washing the dishes and eyed me as I nonchalantly strode in.

“Where have you been,” I asked him casually.

“What?” he exclaimed, “Where have *I* been?”

“Yes, I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

Patrick was well aware of my ruse and just shook his head. He advised, “Just tell Pa when he asks that you were in your room not feeling well. You have your you-know-whats.”

I laughed. I laughed because Patrick always indulged me and took care of me; I laughed because I saw Sarah and we had made plans; I laughed because I was happy, finally.

The rest of the week passed quickly. It was Friday; Harper kept away from me and I kept away from him; Napoleon was his old rambunctious self again and I knew that Sarah was recovering from her ‘accidental fall’ having resumed her tiffin box delivery service to her husband.

The new extensions to Morrison's Family Hotel were now complete and ready for the grand opening Saturday afternoon. The new rooms and amenities had doubled the number of guests we could accommodate and, consequently, Mr Morrison had taken pity on us and put on two more maids—one chamber and one kitchen—and a footman who would double as a factotum just like Patrick and I were.

Now, all that was left was for Mr Morrison to pay the final instalment to Mr Rourke and for Mr Rourke to pay his last three workers their final wages. Normally, this last part of the transaction would have taken place in Mr Rourke's office but, his office being nonexistent, Mr Rourke made his final payments in Mr Morrison's office situated off the public bar. Both Patrick and I were preparing for the usual Friday night swill—outdone only by Saturday night's—and the office door was open.

We could hear the transactions taking place.

"There you go, Gareth, young son. Sign here," Mr Rourke said addressing one of his men, "Caleb, here's yours. Here."

I heard the tearing open of envelopes and one of the young men saying, "Thank you, Mr Rourke, thank you."

"Don't thank me, Gareth, just continue doing the job like you have and there'll be a little extra in each packet for you both."

The other also was very appreciative, "Thanks, Mr Rourke."

The only dissenting voice was Harper's, "Where's the rest of it?"

Mr Rourke dismissed the other two, "I'll see you both on Monday." As they left through the bar and past me and Patrick, Mr Rourke continued, "Johnno, the job's finished. You knew the advance was only until now. Son, I've put a little extra in there for you as well."

"A very little extra. This isn't going to be enough." Anger was mixing with desperation in Harper's voice, "I need more."

"I've got a new job starting on Monday, John. You're the best carpenter I have and I don't want to lose you. Once we get that underway, you'll have more—"

"Monday's too late. I must have it tonight. You can advance me, Mr Rourke."

"You know I can't do that—"

“Well, fuck you, then.” Harper snapped and stormed out of Mr Morrison’s office. Patrick and I stood there flabbergasted by his outburst. I was barely able to jump out of his way as Harper barrelled toward me, hatred consuming him.

Patrick and I stood in his wake watching him push past the few patrons that wandered in through the front door.

My thoughts immediately turned to Sarah and prayed that she would be all right; Patrick was keeping me in check and I could not leave.

The night wore on and I saw no more of John Harper but I heard from Corporal Roberts that he had seen Harper walk into the Greenwood Tree Hotel shortly after he left here.

The Greenwood Tree Hotel was one of the first opened in the area, catering to the largely Irish population employed to build the now twenty-six-year-old Victoria Barracks. It was a little run down but well-patronised by the old swills.

Five o’clock was early to start drinking and it was now close to six. The public bar currently accommodated only the oldest of its most faithful patrons, most of whom were no longer fit for work, each smoking a newfangled machine-made cigarette or sucking on their meerschaums or handmade clay pipes. The one exception was a dark and miserable figure slouched alone at a table in a corner: John Harper. A number of empty pots scattered on the beer-soaked table attested to his state of inebriation.

There he sat in complete self-pity counting his dwindling wages.

The barman removed the empty tankards. In a conciliatory tone, he asked, “Shouldn’t you be making your way home, son?”

John tossed a coin in the barman’s direction, “Another pint.”

The barman could only shake his head and collect the coin with the empties.

In time, the bar filled with its regulars and its regulars filled themselves with Irish whiskey and Guinness and, before long, the place was abuzz with jolly brogue banter, songs from the old country and patriotic calls of “Erin go Bragh”.

By this time, John had drunk away almost half of his wages and was practically insensible.

A trio of merrymakers pushed their way through the crowd toward John's empty chairs and, placing their drinks on the table, one asked, "Oy, matey, are you minding if we set ourselves at this table?"

John barely acknowledged them as he collected the meagre remainder of his wages, stuffed the coins in his pocket and pushed his way through the crowded room and out through the front door. Once outside, it was obvious that it was the crowd that had been holding him upright and he stumbled and fell.

A couple of old Irish workers picked him up and set him on his way, "There you go, son."

The autumn night was dark and chilly and it was nothing short of a miracle that John was able to find his way home, winding his way down the low hill toward his home in Darlinghurst. He was drunk but sombre and resigned to his fate—he knew what was to come.

Stopping by the water pump near the toll gates, John pumped some water up and drenched his head under the flow. It awakened him but he was still drunk, woozy and his thoughts befuddled. He managed to thread the correct streets and mostly stay out of the path of hansom, coaches and dogcarts on the roads and pedestrians and other inebriates on the footpaths.

As he turned into Palmer Lane and saw the staircase to his upper floor home, he thought he was home safe and sound, home and hosed.

With one hand on the bannister rail and one unsteady foot on the first step, a male's voice whispered effeminately close to his ear, "You missed our appointment, Johnny."

John was horrified and turned to face his addresser, a plump, ruddy-complexioned man of about fifty years of age, dressed opulently and stylishly. His manner, as were his clothes, was flamboyant and exaggerated.

"Mr McDonald...I didn't—" John faltered as he caught sight of a large, burly monolith of a man standing a few feet behind the fop. Just as McDonald was the epitome of fashion, Oxley, his companion, was the antithesis, clad in the baggy, ill-fitting, mismatched clobber of a dockworker.

“Didn’t what, darling boy?” McDonald asked, drawing John’s attention back to him, “Didn’t know it was me? Didn’t know it was Friday? Didn’t know it was past five of the clock? Didn’t know today was the day you promised to pay the piper? You’ve had a merry tune, my boy.”

“Mr McDonald...I need more time. My boss didn’t pay me what was due.”

“Is that another of your little excuses, Johnny? Like those you told me last week? And the week before that? Was it a lie that you would pay back today?”

“No! No...My wife, Sarah...she shouldn’t have—”

“But she did,” McDonald let out a feigned regretful sigh, “What are we to do, my dear?”

“Look,” Harper desperately spat out an offer, “Look, Mr McDonald, what if we pay you...in kind?”

McDonald smiled seductively, “What do you have in mind, my sweet boy?”

“My wife...my wife could...satisfy your...you could have her...for your—”

“For my what, dear boy? Pretend wife? Concubine? For my pleasure? Hmm?”

McDonald’s chubby belly was now in contact with John’s; they were face to face as McDonald continued, “I’d be more persuaded if you offered yourself to be my pretend wife. Or concubine. Perhaps we *can* come to some arrangement.”

“No! No,” the thought horrified Harper, “I’ll pay you back, Mr McDonald, I promise, I’ll pay you back!”

Stepping back, McDonald glanced back to his malevolent shadow, Oxley, then spoke to Harper, “You’ve made that promise before, John. Twice before in fact. You don’t seem to understand what a promise is. Or a debt.”

“I’ll pay you on Friday, Mr McDonald, I promise.”

“John, I regret doing this, I really do. You are such a comely young man but you must understand that a debt must be repaid and a promise must be kept.”

“Please...no...”

“This is so you remember to keep your appointment next Friday.” McDonald stepped aside and Oxley stepped forward.

“NO!” Harper’s scream was ineffectual as Oxley grabbed Harper by the coat and pulled him away from the stairs.

“Not the head.” Instructed McDonald as he turned his head away and brushed away some minute dust particle from his shoulder.

What followed in that dark and deserted back alley was a brutal barrage of Oxley’s fists to Harper’s chest, back and abdomen and, once Harper was curled up on the ground, Oxley completed the mnemonic with a kick to Harper’s body.

McDonald reached over and placed a gentle hand on Oxley’s shoulder, “That should suffice, Mr Oxley,” then to Harper, “Please remember your appointment, John. Otherwise Mr Oxley will be most disappointed. And you would not want to disappoint Mr Oxley once again, would you, John?”

As McDonald and Oxley disappeared into the darkened laneway, a figure opened the door to the upper floor home. Sarah stepped onto the landing and stood looking down at her husband lying beaten and bruised, writhing and sobbing in pain.

She felt some sympathy toward him but, at the same time, no empathy. How many times had he left her in that condition? It angered her that he would offer her body to that usuring pawnbroker to pay a debt that he could have easily serviced had he not drunk all his wages away. So many times he had resorted to drink when faced with problems but the problems were never resolved; the money was gone and the problems remained.

Looking down at him, lying there, moaning in pain, she wondered what it was that had made her fall in love with him; did she really fall in love with him or fall in love with being in love? Her father warned her that John’s family were wastrels but she was convinced that John was different. He was a hard worker. He was attentive. What she didn’t know then was that John’s father was a brute and a drunkard who beat his wife and two sons. John’s mother finally left them when his father beat her so badly that she lost an eye. John was only eight. None of them had heard from her since.

With the assistance and advice of her parents, Sarah and John left Parramatta for Sydney town, not only to find work and make a new life but to escape John’s father. But distance was not the cure; John was clearly his father’s son and drink was the demon of the Harpers; the solution to their problems. Would she wait until she, too, lost an eye? Should

she run away with Rebecca? And, if she did, would she be using Rebecca to escape? She did have strong feelings for Rebecca, different to those she had had for John, but were those feelings love or gratitude? Could two women truly love each other?

Sarah was conflicted and confused looking down at Harper, lying in a heap and groaning.

Harper struggled to his knees and vomited, collapsing to the ground once more. Sarah carefully hurried down the stairs to help him and, with much difficulty, they clambered up each unstable step to the landing. Harper whimpered with each effort but was otherwise accepting of Sarah's assistance.

Inside their home, Sarah helped her husband to their bed, flopping him like a rag doll onto it. She proceeded to remove his vomit-stained coat and shirt but he roughly pushed her away, "Leave me!" he growled, "I don't need you."

"John, please let me help you," Sarah implored, "Your clothes are soiled."

"You could have helped," he slurred, "You could have helped..."

"I give you everything I earn, John, everything—"

"You could earn more if you didn't spend all your time with that...that...unnatural bitch tom."

"John—"

Harper lifted himself to a sitting position, "What do you two get up to, eh?"

"John, nothing. We talk—"

"Yeah, talk. Sucking each other's cunnies—"

"John!" Sarah was appalled, "No! We just talk..."

Harper lifted himself from the bed, the pain in his ribs negated by the rage in his heart. He advanced on Sarah, she retreated, he continued his invective, "We'd be better off if you offered your cunny down at the barracks, instead. But who'd shag you? Look at you, you scrawny piece of scrag. Who'd pay a farthing to tup you?"

"John, you don't know what you're saying. Sit down. Please."

John stopped his advance on Sarah and stood wavering in his drunken stupor and staring at her. His face screwed up and Sarah knew that this meant an explosion was building.

“WHERE ARE WE GOING TO GET THE MONEY?” he screamed.

Sarah shrank back visibly. She tried to appease him, “I’ll ask...I’ll ask Mr Morrison. He’s a good man. He’ll help us—”

Harper lunged at Sarah and grabbed her by the throat and shook her, “You’ll stay away from there! Do you understand? Do you?”

Barely able to breathe, Sarah gasped, “Yes, John.”

Harper released her with a rough push; Sarah gasped for her breath. Harper calmed down a little, “You keep away,” and flung himself into the chair at the table, exhausted and in pain, his stomach churning again.

Sarah was horrified to see that she had left Rebecca’s book on China on the table just at the moment Harper caught sight of it. “What’s this?” Harper picked it up and turned to Sarah, “Who gave you this?”

“John—” Sarah pleaded.

“It was her, wasn’t it? It was that bitch, wasn’t it? She was here. In my home! You let her into my home!” Harper got to his feet, book in hand and once more threatened Sarah, “You won’t ever learn, will you, you stupid trollop. This is what I think of her.” Harper violently tore the book apart, sending shreds of paper in every direction, “And this is what I think of you.”

Harper grabbed Sarah by the arm and hair and pulled her close to him, bending her backward. She cried in pain but he didn’t relent, his face in hers, his voice low and menacing, “If I ever catch you with her again, I will kill the both of you.”

CHAPTER 3

Hollow Celebrations

I rose early Saturday morning. Sleep eluded me, concerned that Sarah was all right. Knowing I couldn't go to her because of the preparations for the grand opening of Mr Morrison's hotel extensions made my anxiety even worse.

Combined with that apprehension, my eighteenth birthday was only a few weeks away and I lay awake calculating how far my inheritance would take us and formulating ways and means of getting there with Sarah—to China, to the Americas, to Mother England, to anywhere.

Mr Morrison had invited the entire population of Paddington—all two thousand of them—including the new mayor of Paddington, Benjamin Cocks, Esquire, our Reverend Father Hellfire and Brimstone, the builder Mr Rourke, Corporal Roberts and his coterie of course, all the hotel's current guests, and all of us, his family and staff.

It took us all day but, by five o'clock, the bunting was hung, the tables laid out with the most exotic morsels Cook could concoct, the band from the barracks all tuned up and eager to impress, and the best beer, wines and spirits our young colony produced in abundant supply.

It felt as though all of Paddington fit into Mr Morrison's new premises and he was pleased. I should have been happy for him but my thoughts were elsewhere.

Sarah had slept restlessly as well. Her husband, John, had finally succumbed to his inebriation and lay unconscious beside her in their marital bed.

So many images swirled inside her head as she lay there and they persisted in depriving her of much wanted and needed sleep. She finally gave in to her insomnia and rose to watch the sun rise but the sight of the pages of Rebecca's cherished book on China, torn and strewn about the floor, brought tears to her eyes and a feeling of desperation, of entrapment and of futility.

With a heavy heart she collected all the scraps and placed them on the table. She would explain to Rebecca... what? How could she explain this? What could she possibly say that wouldn't bring herself shame in telling Rebecca that she had failed as a wife?

She looked around the barren room and her heart sank further. Is this what her life had become? A struggle and a fight against poverty? Would there ever be a way out? Seeing John in peaceful slumber made her wish for the days when they were first married. What had changed him?

It was late morning when she rekindled the stove and put on the kettle for tea and a little porridge. She dressed silently and sat down to her breakfast alone with her thoughts.

She was tired and her head and neck ached but worse still was the ache in her heart. She knew she couldn't continue the charade of loving John, of believing that he would change, of hoping that everything would work out for them.

She watched John as he slept deeply; he would be of no use to anyone today. He would most likely sleep all day and well into the night. That's what he was like after every bout of heavy intoxication. And when he woke, he would be remorseful and apologetic, as always but, even so, he would blame Sarah for each of his outbursts.

Sarah spent the day brooding and introspective while she maintained their little hovel and prepared the evening meal, such as it was.

The sun was now low in the western sky and it would be dark soon. Every now and then she would go to John who lay there still, breathing deeply. "If only..." she thought. She loved being with Rebecca. She loved Rebecca.

Her decision was made.

Gathering her shawl quietly from the top draw of the chest, she left closing the door carefully behind her and fled down the stairs and ran...

“Hey, Becky, why so glum?” Patrick’s voice, shouted into my ear, was barely audible over the cacophony of the revellers. He continued, “Pa knows how to do a turn, eh? Want to dance?”

The barrack band was banging out a lively polka—one of my favourites—but I was not in the mood. “No, Patrick, not now. I’m tired.”

“Come on. You’ll feel better when you do,” Patrick insisted and pulled me toward the mass of sweaty bodies bumping into each other as they swirled around the floor clasped to each other in pairs.

Patrick grabbed me around the waist with one arm and grasped my hand with the other and literally carried me into the throng of whirling dervishes. I clung on to him for dear life as he galloped one way and then the other, laughing with each bump and jostle with our neighbours. For a brief moment I forgot my cares and became caught in the moment and laughed...until I caught a glimpse of Sarah in the distance near the door, craning her neck and scanning the room.

“Sarah...” I gasped.

I disentangled myself from Patrick’s embrace with a vague apology and pushed my way through the crowd toward my Sarah. Reaching her, I took her by the hand and led her away toward the service rooms and kitchen.

The kitchen was empty save the pile of dirty dishes that awaited my attention the following morning. I turned to Sarah, so happy to see her until I noticed the bruising on her neck. I was appalled and I knew but I asked anyway, “What happened?”

Sarah discounted my query and said, “I’m leaving John.”

I was stunned and struck speechless as I absorbed the meaning of what she uttered.

“Did you hear me, Rebecca? I’m leaving John. I want to be with you. Forever.”

“I heard you, my love. I could not believe what I heard.”

We embraced each other with such fervour and enthusiasm that I felt we would break.

Letting go of each other, I asked, “Where are your things?”

“I have everything I need, my parents’ locket and you.”

I reached for the locket around Sarah’s neck and carefully opened it. Harper’s photograph had been removed.

Sarah smiled, “That’s for your image.”

This pleased me immensely as it confirmed her intentions, “Have you told John?”

“No.”

“You’ll need somewhere safe to stay while we make plans. I’ll be of age Sunday fortnight and be able to retrieve my inheritance the Monday after.” I took in Sarah and could not believe that she felt the same way about me as I felt about her. “Come, let’s celebrate.” I pulled her toward the party.

“No. Please, Rebecca, I’d rather not.”

I understood her reluctance. “Come to my room. Mr Morrison won’t miss me. And it’ll be a little quieter there.”

We left through the kitchen’s back door and proceeded toward the back stairs. The night was chilly and dark and all the noise we could hear emanated from the new hotel extension. Sarah observed, “All of Paddington must be here. The streets are deserted.”

I smiled, “Mr Morrison certainly knows how to entertain.”

We reached the top floor and I led Sarah into my room and lit the kerosene lamps. Closing the door behind us, I slipped the bolt only to ensure our privacy.

Napoleon roused from his nap and met Sarah with an enthusiastic wag of his tail. Sarah bent down and ruffled his head, “Napoleon. Sorry to wake you, boy.” She looked at me, “Is he all right?”

“Yes, fully recovered.”

“It’s a wonder he can sleep at all with all that partying going on,” she quipped.

“The volunteer band may not be good, but they’re loud,” I added, “Come sit and tell me what happened.” I patted the bed and Sarah sat next to me, letting her shawl drop to the bed.

“Not now,” Sarah hesitated, “Please, I’d rather not. Let us talk about us.”

I took Sarah's hands in mine and kissed each gently then looked into her eyes. She moved close to me and our lips met.

Napoleon growled.

"Napoleon, it's all right. We're not hurting each other," I assured my dog but then realised he was looking at the door. "Napoleon..."

The dog barked viciously and incessantly. "Napoleon! Quiet!"

A mighty crash and the door burst open, splinters from the door and door frame flew everywhere and showered Napoleon. Sarah and I jumped to our feet, shocked and shaken.

Napoleon snarled and growled ferociously and viciously; I had never seen him so fierce.

A hulking form stood in the doorway. It was Harper. His fists were clenched and his look was murderous.

"What do you want?" I screamed, "Get out!" I picked up a book and threw it at him.

Sarah shrank away into a corner of the room, shocked.

Napoleon continued his violent barrage, baring his fangs and snapping at Harper.

"I want my woman!" Harper growled and took a purposeful step inside.

Napoleon attacked and grabbed Harper's trouser leg in his jaws. Without hesitation, Harper kicked Napoleon so hard that he yelped and released his grip. Harper kicked him again and sent him careening across the room.

I immediately rushed Harper and attacked him with my fists. A punch to my head sent me to the floor, dazed.

Harper advanced on Sarah. I managed to grab Harper's leg as he passed me. He retaliated by turning on me, "You're dead, you fucking bitch!" and grabbed me by the bodice of my dress, pulled me up and drew back to strike me.

Sarah grabbed his raised arm, "No, John! Don't!!"

Harper turned on Sarah and grabbed her by her throat and flung her across the room like a rag doll. The force hurled her onto the end of my bed, striking her head on the wrought iron bed head. She lay there stunned and holding her head.

Napoleon was injured but managed to renew his determined attack and hooked his fangs into Harper's thigh. Harper screamed in agony and violently pushed me away. I fell to the floor, dizzy, disoriented, groggy and in pain.

Harper punched Napoleon to the head time and time again until Napoleon let go but Harper did not relent. He continued to punch and kick Napoleon until blood oozed from my beloved dog's head and he lay motionless on the floor.

Harper turned his attention to me; his voice gravelly and threatening, "I told you what I'd do," he took a step toward me, "I told you to stay away."

"*This damned skirt!*" I thought, trying to disentangle my legs from it. I struggled to my feet just as Harper was upon me again. This time I was prepared and struck him with my fist in his throat. It had the effect I wanted and he doubled over trying to catch his breath. I hit him again and again to his head but he was far stronger than I was and, once he had caught his breath, fended me off effortlessly.

I backed away; he advanced upon me with a look I will never forget. He was like a demon possessed with the destruction of all living things. I looked about for anything I could use to defend myself and picked up the closest object, a large book and threw that at him.

It glanced off him and he barely flinched. He had me backed in a corner and was within an arm's length.

"John!" Sarah cried in desperation as she tried to come to my aid from my bed, "John, don't hurt her! I'll come with you! Don't hurt her!"

Harper stared at me as he responded to Sarah's plea, "Oh, you'll come with me, my love." And grabbed me by the throat and punched me to the head and to the body. I don't know how many times but I do remember Sarah screaming, "No! No! Rebecca!" as the world went black around me.

Then all was still and quiet.

"Becky...Becky...Oh God! Becky..."

Pain seared through my body. I could feel someone's hand on my face but I couldn't see anything and could just barely hear...then darkness.

The next sensation I felt was that of being lifted. My pain was excruciating. I could barely breathe, my chest and head hurt so much. I remember groaning and I remember hearing Mr Morrison telling someone to be careful. I remember uttering, “Sarah...”

When I woke, unfamiliar smells of carbolic acid, urine and vomit filled my olfactory senses. It was difficult to open my eyelids; they were painful and swollen but I did make out that it was daytime and I was lying down and surrounded by shadowy, indistinct figures.

“Sarah?” My voice was hoarse and my utterance barely a whisper.

“Becky...” was the gentle reply to my question.

I turned my attention to the voice, “Patrick?” That’s when the intensity of the pain in my chest caught me unawares, “Oh, God!”

“Shh, Becky. You have three fractured ribs. You’ve been badly beaten. Lie still.”

I closed my eyes to the overwhelming pain then the awful memories came flooding back. Harper! “Sarah,” I begged, “Where’s Sarah? Is she all right?”

“Becky...Sarah’s—”

“Rebecca...” I reopened my eyes to Mr Morrison’s gentle interruption, “Rebecca, you need to rest. Doctor is here.”

Barely able to move and just able to open my eyes, I took in the scene around me. I was surrounded by Patrick and his father on either side and two nuns and a doctor. “Where am I?” I asked.

“St Vincent’s hospital,” Mr Morrison informed me.

“And Sarah? Where’s Sarah? Is she here?” Panic caused me to breathe erratically and that caused me pain. I groaned in both agony and anguish.

A deep male voice interjected, “You must rest, Miss Davies. Sister.”

One of the nuns pushed a syringe into my mouth and squirted a bitter liquid into it, “Swallow,” she ordered. I gasped as I swallowed involuntarily.

“This will help you sleep,” the deep male voice added, “Come, Mr Morrison, Master Morrison. The sisters will take good care of her.”

Before I could utter another word, my eyes closed and I was free of pain once more.

During the six days they held me captive at the new hospital under the soporific effect of laudanum, I had only one dream that I remember. It was very vivid and terrified me: Harper's malevolent face was pushed up close to mine and his voice was harsh and threatening as he whispered, "I told you I would kill you both but you didn't believe me." I could even smell his rum-soaked breath hot on my face. That awful image replayed itself every time I regained consciousness.

There were times when I woke and all was darkness. I was thirsty and I was hungry and I was alone with my pain and my distress for Sarah. I would call for Sarah but only a nun would come to attend my needs. Other times, during the day, Patrick would be there and took care of me with such love that I knew I could never reciprocate. But I did love him. Through all this, no one would tell me about Sarah.

Time did heal the wounds but only those of the body. My chest still hurt but I could move without too much pain and the swelling to my face had lessened which meant I could now see even though I had bouts of dizziness and headaches. I was finally released from the custody of the Sisters of Charity and given into the care of Mr Morrison with the recommendation that I be kept in a calm and quiet state of mind. But calmness and quietude for me were lost to fear and worry for Sarah. I was determined to know that Sarah was well and with her parents in Parramatta.

The short buggy ride home over the uneven Old South Head road caused me to feel the injuries I had despite the medicine the nuns administered on my departure. That same medication caused me to feel quite drowsy and unable to form coherent sentences. My brain was working but my mouth was not.

When we arrived at the courtyard of the hotel, I was helped out of the carriage by Mr Morrison and Patrick and led to the back stairs. My limbs felt like jelly as I held onto the banister at the bottom step.

"Hold on, Becky," Patrick gently ordered as he scooped me up in his arms and carried me up the three flights. I clung to his neck in a painful stupor.

Mr Morrison preceded us and, upon reaching the top landing, opened the door to my room and we went in. I realised where we were and the memories flooded back. An anguished cry escaped me as Patrick rested me on my bed. I sobbed uncontrollably.

Patrick tried consoling me, “Becky...”

I took Patrick’s arm and begged, “Where’s Sarah?” I knew the answer...

Mr Morrison sat on the end of the bed and cradled my legs. “Rebecca, my darling Rebecca...Sarah’s dead.”

Every muscle in my body spasmed and an unbidden, unnatural guttural cry filled my room. I turned to Patrick and curled up, numbed to any physical pain. His arms gently encircled me as I wept for Sarah. So many emotions swirled and pulled at me: sadness that someone so young should be taken; anger that I was unable to save her; hatred for the man who took her from me; remorse that we had not run away sooner, but the most overpowering emotion was revenge. And he would pay for murdering Sarah.

I don’t know how long I stayed this way; I was all cried out, the opiates administered to me induced an overpowering lethargy and I must have fallen into a deep slumber. When I woke, it was nightfall and I was covered with a blanket.

“Here, drink this,” Patrick said as he approached me with a cup of hot tea, “It’s fresh and it’s hot.”

I gingerly sat up and gratefully took the cup.

Patrick pulled a chair close to me and looked at me with such compassion that I felt a tear escape. He was as devastated as I was, “I’m so sorry, Becky. I know what she meant to you.”

The tea was a welcome restorative to some sort of normality. After a few minutes, I regained control of the thoughts roiling through my mind and whispered, “Napoleon?”

Patrick shook his head remorsefully.

I shed a few more regretful tears for my beloved dog and his courage in protecting me and Sarah. At the very least, I knew that justice would prevail and that bastard would hang for killing Sarah. Anger overcame me, “Tell me he’s in gaol.”

Patrick looked away, lost for words.

“Patrick?”

“No.”

I did not understand his single word reply, “No?”

“The police superintendent said there nothing they could charge him with.”

I was stunned, “Sarah’s dead. He killed her. He threatened to kill us both. And he did his damndest to kill me. I will testify to that and more.”

“Becky, Pa and I tried but the police determined that Sarah’s death was an accident. Pa even went to see the Inspector General of Police, John McLerie.” I was completely confused. Patrick continued, “She was found at the bottom of the stairs in Palmer Lane. The staircase had come away. You know how rickety it was. Harper said a scream and a crash woke him from a deep sleep early Sunday morning. He went to see what it was and found Sarah at the bottom of the stairs, motionless.”

Words escaped me.

“Pa and I both know it’s complete and utter horse shit but there is no proof of what he did to you and Sarah. And Napoleon.”

“Who, then, did this to me and Napoleon?” I asked completely staggered.

Patrick scoffed, “A burglar. The police said you most likely disturbed a housebreaker when you came up. Harper swore that he and Sarah never left their place Saturday night.”

“He was here! Harper came here to take Sarah back. She left him when he beat her again.”

Patrick hesitated, confused, “I didn’t find a case with her belongings.”

“No. She left what little she had behind. He must have followed her. Sarah came here! You saw her.”

“I didn’t see her, Becky. You and I were dancing and you pulled away and left. I didn’t know where you went or who you went with. The place was crowded and completely crazy. But I do know she was here.”

“Someone must have seen Sarah arrive, Harper break the door in.”

“The police made enquiries and no one came forward. No one saw or heard anything that night. Remember that almost everybody was here on Saturday night and it

was quite raucous. Palmer Lane is deserted at the best of times. You saw what it was like when we went. And if they took the back streets and dunny lanes...And he has an alibi.”

“An alibi? Whoever gave it is lying.”

“Rourke.”

“Rourke? He was at the party.”

“Rourke said that he called on Harper after he left the party and Harper was asleep in bed. He said that Sarah answered the door.”

“Liar!”

“I know. It’s in his interest to lie. Most of the skilled trades have gone off to the goldfields. Rourke started the new job last Monday and I heard that he put Harper on and gave him the advance he was after. And he gave Harper a glowing character to the police.”

I was falling deeper and deeper into a mire of desperation. “Napoleon mauled Harper’s thigh. Did they check that?”

“I didn’t know that, Becky.”

“I’ll tell them. And I’ll tell them Rourke’s a liar. Take me to the police.” I threw the rug off and attempted to climb out of bed. Patrick gently stopped me.

“I won’t make a difference, Becky. The police super has closed the case.”

I was devastated. Harper had won. “No! He can’t get away with murder!”

“Becky, I want him to hang as well but, other than your word, there’s no proof that he did it. And everyone knows how you felt about Sarah and how much you hated Harper. The police will see your evidence as spite. We have no actual proof that he was here and that he did this to you. Or Napoleon...or Sarah.”

I felt desperate and helpless once more, “She was here, Patrick, Sarah was here and Harper did this to us.”

“I believe you, Becky.” He went to my tallboy and removed a folded article from the top drawer. “I found this when I cleaned up your room,” and handed me Sarah’s shawl.

I gasped and took it reverently in my hands. I buried my face in it and breathed in Sarah’s essence, “Sarah...” my tears flowed again.

“And this,” he continued, handing me Sarah’s silver locket and chain, “This was tangled in the bedclothes. I had the chain repaired.”

I took it tenderly in my hand and remembered the first time I saw it around Sarah's neck. All those wonderful times we spent together; the promises we made. I let Sarah down. I did not protect her. She died because of me. I burned with hatred and the injustice of Sarah's murder. But I could not understand why Sarah had to die. "Oh, Patrick, how could anyone do what he did?"

"Because he is what you said he is. A drunkard and a bastard. And he's got away with it."

I looked up at Patrick. I felt helpless and useless; I felt that my reason for living had died with Sarah. "Where is Sarah now?"

"At St Patrick's Roman Catholic cemetery. Her parents took her back to Parramatta. They didn't want Harper to have anything further to do with her or her funeral. He came to see you, you know. At the hospital."

I looked at Patrick, confused. Patrick continued, "On Thursday, when I came to see you, there he was, like nothing had happened, standing over you. I don't know what he said to you but when he saw me, he promptly left. I followed him out and warned him off and I told him that he wasn't welcome at the hotel either. In his usual, charming manner, he told me to...well you can imagine what he told me."

It wasn't a dream. "He told me he was going to kill me."

Mr Morrison was very considerate and allowed me all the time my body needed to mend itself; my heart and soul, however, would never mend. I wore Sarah's silver locket and kept her shawl beside me on my bed. I mourned her and I mourned poor Napoleon and I found myself weeping without knowing. I had not shed as many tears for my mother and I loved her more than anyone. The suddenness of this catastrophe made my loss profound.

Patrick attended to my every need and whim and made sure that I remained in close proximity to him; he feared Harper would try to fulfil his promise.

My eighteenth birthday anniversary was less than a week away and I was not looking forward to it or the celebration that Mr Morrison and Cook had been planning well before my attack by the supposed burglar. I felt empty and weary and could not find any purpose to my life anymore.

My days were spent in the kitchen with Cook, trying to be of help, or in the bar with Patrick. Corporal Roberts would try to make me laugh and the patrons were conciliatory but this only made things worse and only brought on the tears; I just wanted to be alone. Night time was the only time I had to myself but only after Mr Morrison installed a hefty door bar to keep intruders out—Mediaeval, but effective.

Two days out from my birthday, the yearning I had to see Sarah overcame me and, at the communal breakfast table, I announced to no one in particular, “I’m going to Parramatta to see Sarah.”

The silence that descended on the family and staff was palpable as each looked to one and then the other.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Rebecca,” Mr Morrison softly declared, “You don’t know who’ll be there.”

“I want to pay my respect,” I urged.

“Not by yourself.”

I looked to Patrick, who offered, “I’ll go with her, Pa.”

“I don’t like it.”

Patrick reassured, “Harper’s working in Botany now and, if he’s not there, he’d be dead drunk in Darlinghurst. Why would he visit Sarah, anyway?”

Clearly, Mr Morrison was not happy with this proposal and he took his time to deliberate. “All right, son, but I want you to take the revolver with you.”

Patrick and I exchanged horrified looks. Mr Morrison added, “You just don’t know what feral dogs you might come across.”

Later that morning, after I had collected a large bunch of banksias and grevilleas growing wild at the back of the barracks, Patrick and I took the omnibus to the new Redfern Station close to Devonshire Street. It was now the middle of autumn and the weather was cool and it threatened to rain. Much to Patrick’s dismay, I dressed in my trousers, collared shirt and jacket, rather than a skirt and bodice, as much to keep warm as to not feel restricted should the worse happen: that we encounter the “feral dog” Patrick’s father spoke of but Patrick reassured me again that this would be most unlikely. Nevertheless, Mr Morrison’s old

revolver was wrapped in a cloth and carried in the satchel slung across Patrick's shoulder and at the ready.

The twenty or so mile train journey took us through the stations at Newtown, Ashfield, Burwood, Homebush, Parramatta Junction then on to Parramatta Station and, at each stop, I apprehensively scanned the passengers on the platform awaiting to embark. Perhaps I was being paranoid but I didn't want to be taken by surprise again.

Alighting at Parramatta Station, we were only a few blocks away from St Patrick's Roman Catholic Church and its cemetery...and Sarah.

It didn't take us long to locate Sarah's resting place. Her parents had erected a beautiful headstone to her memory. It was made of sandstone and stood four and a half feet tall. Beneath the Calvary cross the chiselled words brought a lump to my throat and then surprised me:

In Memory of our Beloved Daughter

Sarah Kathleen Harper

nee O'Dwyer

Born 16th July 1853

Died 28th March 1874

Weep not for me or my brief life;

I was a loving daughter and a dutiful wife;

My life was taken by a worthless sot

And God will punish whom the Law did not.

We both stood in silence reading the words over again. There was no doubt that Sarah's parents knew Sarah had died by Harper's hand and that they were, as we were, helpless in bringing that murderous bastard to justice.

Patrick put a reassuring arm around my shoulders. More to Sarah than to him, I whispered, "Harper will pay. I swear this on my mother's grave, he will pay with his life."

"Becky..." Patrick's words were more a warning than a comfort, "Becky, he'll drink himself to death before long."

I put the grevilleas and banksias at the foot of the headstone, made the sign of the cross and bowed my head in a silent prayer for Sarah's eternal peace...and for God to give

me strength. Patrick did the same and, after a few minutes' silence, we turned and left the cemetery and Sarah. I did not know at the time that I would never visit her again.

The next day, the eve of my eighteenth birthday, the heavens roared with thunderstorms and drenching rain. The day was as dark and gloomy as was I. Visiting Sarah made her death and my loss real. My own mother's death hadn't affected me this way. There was no feeling of injustice in my mother's death; it was God's will. Sarah's? Was it God's will or the act of a man driven by his demons, by jealousy, by possessiveness? Surely not the act of a benevolent God but one of Satan. I made Sarah promises before that I had not kept but this last promise that I swore to her, I would keep and I intended keeping very soon.

After supper and after the day's work was finalised, I excused myself, bade everyone a good night and went to my room by the internal stairs.

Once there, I changed into my trousers and jacket and put on my mackintosh and cabbage tree, as it was still raining but the violent storms had passed.

Going down by the external stairs meant I would not be seen by the family or staff. I carefully opened the stable door and made sure the groom was still with the rest of the family and staff playing whist and selected my favourite pony, Whiskey.

With an apology for waking him, I led him by his halter out through the door and out the back gate where I easily jumped onto his back. We walked off down the laneway in the drizzling rain. I was a reasonably good horsewoman and had ridden bareback many times. Whiskey was docile and compliant so we would have no difficulty reaching my destination quickly and without incident.

We took the Old South Head road toward the city right up to George Street and then down toward Circular Quay. There was little pedestrian traffic this night and that which was there hurried along to get out of the rain. The carriages and omnibuses, too, appeared to be scurrying for shelter.

Reaching the end of George Street and the infamous Rocks, I looked for the street signs and found what I was seeking: Harrington Place.

I turned Whiskey into it; it was dark, the street lighting was poor, and the only movement I saw was from the shadows of doorways: the burning red tip of a cigarette; the

wispy smoke from a pipe decimated by the rain; a shiny water-soaked rat scampering from one pile of rubbish to another.

Corporal Roberts' words echoed in my head: *It's a bad place, Harrington Place. Keep well clear of it. And them.*

Whiskey walked on until we came across a woman huddled in an entranceway. She was dishevelled, old and probably didn't have the money for a bed.

Retrieving sixpence from my pocket, I offered it to her, "Do you know where I can find Jeramiah Hickson? The Push?"

The old woman looked at me with suspicion, "What would you be wanting with him?" she croaked.

"Where?" pushing the coin closer.

"Wharf three. The shed," she said snatching the coin from my hand.

"Thank you."

It didn't take long to find what I sought. The old wooden shed next to the wharf was dimly lit from inside and, under the sound of the rain pelting the ground, I could hear the disorderly carryings-on of several men.

With apprehension, I slid off Whiskey and knocked on the door.

Everyone inside fell silent. After a moment, the door opened slightly and a husky, ambiguous voice demanded, "What do you want?"

"Jeremiah Hickson. I was told he was here."

"And who are you, dearie?"

I didn't want to announce myself so replied, "Tell him it's the girl from Morrison's Hotel in Paddington. He probably won't remember me—"

"Course I remember you! The comely lass," Hickson sneered as he pushed the interrogator out of the way, "Come in, come in."

"No...thank you."

"All right, you're the one what's getting soaked. What can I do for you this fine evening?"

This was it. There was no going back once I made my declaration. I hesitated.

Hickson was not a patient man, “Ain’t going to wait all night, me lovely,” and began to close the door on me.

I pushed it open, “I need your help.”

“Of course, sweetness, but I ain’t no charity.”

“I can pay,” my heart was pounding.

“Up front.”

“I’ll have the money on Monday.”

“Then I’ll help you on Tuesday.” He looked me up and down and his lecherous thoughts amplified onto his ugly face, “What is it that you want from me, my timid little titter?”

CHAPTER 4

Sunday, 12th April, 1874

Coming of Age

The much anticipated night had finally arrived—much anticipated, that is, by everyone but me. My dream had been that Sarah would be with me to celebrate the event and to plan our future together. But this night, in the midst of fifteen jovial people, I felt sad and so alone.

My mother, bless her memory, made sure that I would be provided for and that my eighteenth birthday would be my ‘coming of age’ as she deemed, with the guidance of her mentor, Mr Morrison, I would have been mature enough to lead my own life and control my own finances. She had entrusted Patrick’s father with looking after my small inheritance until that time and it was this that I now avidly anticipated.

The table in our private dining room was extended to accommodate all of the staff as well as my dear friends from the barracks, Corporal Roberts and his company of merry men.

The meal was splendid; Cook had prepared all my favourites: fricandeau of veal, stewed cucumbers with white sauce, potato ribbons and stuffed onions, and now we were chatting and reminiscing amiably but I did notice that nobody spoke of Sarah or what had happened to me.

Mr Morrison was doing his best to keep me in the right mood and spirit of the event but my heart just wasn’t responding.

Patrick, as usual, was seated beside me and every now and then glanced at me to see how I was coping.

With a look to his father and one to Cook, he and Cook rose from their seats and disappeared into the kitchen. Moments later, they returned, Patrick carrying a large iced cake with a burning candle atop it. With their entrance, the assembled crowd rose to their feet and gave a mighty cheer.

I was both befuddled and embarrassed that such a fuss was being made. It was a beautiful confection decorated with sugar roses and leaves. I was dumbfounded and awestruck.

Patrick carefully set the cake down in front of me; Cook resumed her place with a proud smile on seeing my reaction.

Mr Morrison stood with a glass in his hand and gently tapped it with his knife, “Quiet. Quiet, please.” Everyone’s attention turned to him and he continued, “Thank you,” then addressed me directly, “Rebecca Victoria Davies, today you have completed eighteen years on God’s earth—” At this, the crowd cheered and stomped their feet and those who weren’t encumbered with a glass of frothy beer, clapped their hands.

Mr Morrison signalled the crowd to settle down then continued, “I remember thinking, on the day you were born and hearing you cry for the first time, ‘this one’s trouble.’”

This brought on another round of hooting and laughter, subdued once again by Mr Morrison, who resumed his homily, “But, despite your propensity for wearing trousers and beating Patrick to a pulp at fisticuffs, you have grown into a fine young lady.”

I felt so deceitful when the crowd cheered and agreed; if they only knew what was in my heart.

Mr Morrison continued, “Your dear mother, Anwen, may God rest her soul, asked me to read these words—her words—to you tonight.” He retrieved a folded sheet of paper from his pocket as the crowd fell silent. Everybody in the room knew my mother and I know they each held her in the highest regard. She was educated, well-spoken and gentle. She would do anything to help anyone. After six years since her passing, I still missed her.

Mr Morrison read slowly and with compassion and, as he read, I heard my mother's lilting Welsh voice saying these words directly to me, "My darling daughter Rebecca, how I wish I could be there to celebrate this important milestone with you but it is not God's will. Today, you leave your childhood behind and step tentatively into womanhood. How I wish I could be there to guide you through the dark, twisting alleyways of self-doubt into the broad, sun filled boulevards of love and devotion. There is nothing more precious than respect and love; respect that is earned and love that is given. In the scant twelve years I have known you, my dearest Rebecca, I know that in whatever you choose to do, you will choose to do it for the right reasons and with honesty, integrity and love. Your lucky star will guide and protect you, and I will watch over you forever. May God bless you with a long and happy life. Your loving Mother."

I thought that I had no more tears left yet I found them falling once again. Were they for the grief of losing my mother; for the love that was given to me by her and Sarah; for the betrayal of integrity and honesty that was about to come?

Whatever my reasons, I found that the room had become deathly quietly save for the sniffles of those that, like me, had been affected by my mother's words. Patrick wiped his eyes and blew his nose on his handkerchief and even Corporal Roberts was lost for words.

Finally, Mr Morrison took his glass up and addressed me, "Make a wish and blow out the candle, dear."

I did as requested. The wish I made that day ruled me for the rest of my life: that God give me the strength to never again allow anyone to escape justice for harming any woman or girl.

Once the smoke from the candle has swirled and dissipated, Mr Morrison raised his glass and solemnly entreated, "Charge your glasses, ladies and gentlemen and be upstanding," at which we all stood, "Long live Queen Victoria."

We echoed, "Long live the Queen," as sipped from our glass.

Mr Morrison then addressed me directly, "Rebecca Victoria Davies, may your life's path be straight, may the sun always be at your back and may you live a long and happy life."

“Hear! Hear!” cheered the assembly and drained their glasses. All but Patrick resumed their raucous festivities. He turned to me and whispered so that only I could hear him, “Rebecca Victoria Davies, will you marry me?”

The look of fright, shock and perhaps even horror that I returned must have caused Patrick some concern as he added, “Of course, you don’t have to answer me now. Think about it.” With a flash of embarrassment, he turned to speak to Cook about some inconsequential matter.

I felt stunned and completely taken aback. If I had ever wanted to be married and have children, it certainly would have been to Patrick as I knew of no other more sincere, caring, supportive or funny young man in the whole colony. But I had never felt matrimonially or maternally inclined to him or anyone. How could I tell him this without hurting his feelings and damaging his pride? I was glad that Patrick had given me time to think about my answer – even though I knew what it would be—because I didn’t know where I would be in a week’s time.

As promised, Mr Morrison took me to the Bank of New South Wales the very first thing the next day, Monday, and formalised the transfer of my mother’s bequest to me. It was a tidy sum, more than I had expected. Mr Morrison was an astute business man and, while I certainly wasn’t the richest eighteen-year-old in the colony, my inheritance would have made a very handsome dowry.

Once the transfer was completed, we took care of a few errands in town and then made our way home where, outwardly, nothing had changed.

Patrick was his usual ebullient self even though I knew he was smarting from my tacit rejection and Mr Morrison still treated me like his own daughter even though I knew he was concerned that I would squander the small fortune. And I pretended that all was well even though the plans I had devised meant that everything would change forever, and imminently.

After the luncheon ritual had been completed, I made an excuse that I needed to take Whiskey and go into town again to buy a special book to commemorate my coming of age. However, I declined to tell Mr Morrison that my first stop would be the bank. I drove

Whiskey along faster than his normal unhurried pace and we made it to the bank just before closing time.

Our next stop was one which made my heart sink but I pushed all doubts aside and carried my resolution through with unwavering determination and headed for the wharves.

After completing my third and the only task I had declared, Whiskey and I returned home with my new purchase, *Murray's Hand-book Turkey in Asia and Constantinople*, and to Patrick's mocking comments about how long that simple task had taken and that either, or both, Whiskey and I were getting on in age and may be heading for the knackery before too long.

Notwithstanding Patrick's poor attempt at humour, I slept fitfully that night. My internal angels and demons were warring and the pendulum of virtue and justice swung wildly from one side to the other.

The new day brought with it cloud-laden skies and incessant rain and the darkness that was in the heavens was reflected in the gloom of my heart. Patrick, ever observant, approached me apologetically as we washed the breakfast dishes. "Becky," he began tentatively, "please don't be mad at me. I'm sorry if I put pressure on you the other night. Take all the time you need and I won't be too disappointed if your answer is 'no'. For now," he added with an impish smile.

I returned his smile and reassured, "I'm not mad at you, Patrick," and gave him a comforting hug, "I do love you, you know that."

He returned my embrace more enthusiastically than my sore ribs could tolerate and I let out a short gasp.

"Oh, Becky, I'm sorry," he apologised and immediately released his hold on me.

"It still hurts," I feebly explained.

Patrick knew what I meant.

Because of the heavy rain, it was unlikely that there would be any activity at the many building sites around the city and surrounding areas. The roads were drenched and muddy as were the few patrons who ventured out in such inclement weather to share a beer with their mates, consequently there was not very much to do in the bar that evening.

The evening wore on and each time I looked at our longcase clock in the foyer, the passing of an hour seemed to take twice as long as the one before.

Closing time had finally arrived and the rain had abated but still persisted. After completing the last of my chores, I said my ‘good nights’ and headed up to my room where, rather than changing into my night dress, I donned my shirt and trousers and laid down on my bed, my eyes fixed firmly on my little mantle clock. It was quarter of eleven. “Only a few hours left,” I found myself whispering. I felt nothing but the righteousness of my actions.

The room that Sarah had kept so clean and neat a few short weeks ago was now an untidy, unkempt confusion of empty rum bottles, discarded clothing and unwashed kitchen utensils, which the one fat tallow candle, burning slowly near the bed, pitilessly highlighted.

Strewn haphazardly across that bed was the unconscious, dishevelled form of John Harper, a bottle of rum clenched in his fist.

The rain sizzled on the corrugated iron roof and seeped through the several rust holes in it, plopping onto the tin floor. The only other sounds were of Harper’s snoring; he was in a deep, alcohol-induced sleep. Unable to work because of the rain, his day had been occupied by drinking away the wages he earned from Rourke the builder. He had paid his debt to McDonald but was close to approaching him again in order to keep his supply of grog coming. The rains meant no work and no work meant no pay.

Since Sarah’s death, Harper’s sleep had been restless and his dreams nonexistent and, every night since her death, he had mollified his abhorrent actions with stupor-inducing rum.

Harper didn’t hear the front door opening.

“Wake up, princess,” a harsh mocking voice intoned close to Harper’s ear, “Wake up, your highness.”

Harper felt his shoulder being prodded. He didn’t want to dream and flung the offending hand away, “Go away!” his slurred and turned away. But the hand was insistent and was joined by another which shook his shoulders violently.

“Rise and shine, your majesty.”

Harper suddenly became aware that this was not a dream and, startled, turned to see the obnoxious face of Jeremiah Hickson, practically nose to nose, smiling cruelly at him. Harper pushed himself upright and realised with some apprehension that there were three others standing behind the owner of the ugly face. “Who are you?” The shock of seeing these loathsome intruders standing over him set his pulse racing.

“Let me introduce ourselves. That’s Ratface, Shingles and Tuppenny. And I’m Jeremiah Hickson,” was the rough and pretentious reply.

“What do you want? I don’t have any money.”

“We know that, sunshine, money ain’t what we want.”

“I don’t have anything worth stealing,” he begged as he pushed himself against the bedhead.

“An apology.”

“Wha—?”

“You heard, petal, we want you to say you’re sorry. An apology.”

Harper was confused and befuddled. A glimmer of recognition came through his muddled mind, “You’re...you’re the Larrikin mob from Morrison’s pub—”

Hickson grabbed Harper by his shirt and pulled him off the bed, “Got it in one, darling. Now for that apology.”

Hickson pushed Harper toward the table while Ratface, the shabbiest of the four, cleared the table of its unwashed cup and plate and placed a sheet of paper and pencil on it.

John was slowly regaining his sensibilities and, not comprehending why these four men were there, railed at the intrusion. He struggled with Hickson but his arms were grabbed by Shingles and Tuppenny, both larger than Hickson, who thrust Harper into the awaiting chair and held him there unable to move.

“Let me go!” he ordered, his voice filled with anger and yet fearful.

“Soon,” promised Hickson, pushing the piece of paper and pencil toward Harper, “Now let’s make this simple and to the point. Write, ‘I’m sorry for everything’.”

Harper didn’t want to even if he could; his arms were held tight. He struggled to free his arm, “Tell him to let go of my arm!”

Hickson nodded and Tuppenny released Harper's arm. Seizing the opportunity to break free, Harper sprang from the chair and pushed Shingles away but was only able to take a few steps before he was overpowered by all four louts. A heavy punch by Hickson to Harper's diaphragm quickly subdued him and he was thrust back into his chair, doubled over, winded and trying to breathe.

Hickson bent over him and threatened, "Don't make this harder than it need be, Johnno. It'll be over soon and we'll be gone. Now write."

Harper, still gasping for breath, picked up the pencil and scrawled as Hickson slowly dictated, "I'm sorry for everything.' Good boy. Now sign it."

Ratface, peering over Harper's shoulder, queried, "Ain't 'everything' with a 'k'?"

"Shut up, idiot." Hickson picked up the sheet of paper and admired it, "Good. Good," he teased and placed it in the centre of the table.

Harper glanced from one to another, fear and apprehension exuding from every pore, "You got what you wanted, now go."

Hickson sneered, "Not quite done yet, laddie," then nodded to his men who understood exactly what they were to do.

Shingles produced a long coil of rope and tossed one end over a rafter; that end was tied as a noose.

Harper realised what was to come, "No! NO!" and sprang to his feet in a life-and-death flight for the door. Hickson caught him by the legs and tackled Harper to the floor. In a heartbeat, Ratface and Tuppenny were on top of Harper as he thrashed about in a desperate struggle to free himself. Had he not been as drunk as he was, he may have been able to fend off these three men. His energy depleted, he stopped struggling and begged for his life, "No, please don't," as they lifted him up and dragged him toward the awaiting rope. "Please, please," he cried, tears streaming down his face, "What did I do to you? Please don't do this."

Hickson took hold of the noose and managed to push it over Harper's head, assuring him, "This won't hurt a bit...it'll hurt a lot!" bringing peals of cruel laughter from his gang.

"No...no...NO..."

Harper felt the rope tightening around his neck as he saw the other end being pulled taut by Shingles. He was now being lifted by his neck, his feet just barely making contact with the floor. The three men holding him released him. Harper desperately grabbed at the rope around his neck that was slowly strangling him, trying to loosen it. The three men joined the fourth and pulled down on the rope in unison.

Harper was lifted several feet into the air, thrashing his legs, twisting and turning, unable to breathe, unable to speak, unable to beg for mercy.

Hickson and his boys found immense amusement in this horrendous sight.

“He’s a fine dancer, ain’t he?” quipped Ratface.

Harper’s struggles became involuntary twitches as the life was squeezed from him by the tightening noose. His body finally stopped moving and hung there limply.

Hickson wrapped the end of the rope around a post and securely tied it.

“Top’d and twisted,” Hickson said as he placed the chair near Harper’s feet then kicked it over, “Job’s done. Come on, boys.”

Looking about, Hickson watched as Ratface rifled through the chest of drawers, “Oy! What are you doing?”

“Just seeing if there’s anything worth having,” was the frank reply.

“Leave it, idiot, suicides don’t steal from themselves.”

They filed out of the hovel and all was silent save for the sizzle of the rain on the corrugated iron roof and the plopping of the drops on the tin floor—and the creaking of the rope as it stretched under the weight of the dead John Harper.

I stood at the foot of the stairs and peered up to see a feeble light flickering through the window. The rain had stopped and the sallow moon peeked from its hiding place low in the western sky. I tied Whiskey’s halter lead to the railing and took my first tentative step up the stairs. Was it I who was shaking or the stairs? With each step upward my apprehension grew; it was I who shook with trepidation, not the stairs.

I stepped onto the landing and avoided looking through the window. My hand went to the silver locket around my neck. Steeling myself against what I imagined I would find when I opened the door, I grasped the door handle and pushed it open.

What I saw in the dim, flickering candlelight made my stomach turn and I involuntarily dry retched. Regaining my composure, I forced myself to look at the horrendous scene before me: John Harper, his unseeing eyes bulging through his eyelids, his swollen tongue protruding from his blue lips, suspended from the ceiling rafter, slowly turning like a carousel in a fairground. His corpse was limp and had lost control of its bodily functions; urine and excrement soiled his trousers and the floor beneath him.

I stared at him for a long time, conflicted by what I had put in motion. My fingers tightened around the silver locket.

Had he not been John Harper and had he not murdered Sarah, killed my dog and tried his damndest to kill me, I could have found sympathy for this man and have prayed that God take his soul in peaceful rest. But he was John Harper and he had escaped man's justice and this, his end, was what he deserved and what he would have received if he had been served true justice. May the Devil take him and may he rot in hell for eternity!

I did do the righteous thing.

I willed my anger to dissipate and looked about the room that until a few weeks prior, Sarah had filled with her light and presence. Despite the chaos of Harper's living habits, I could see Sarah there. I imagined what horror her last few hours must have been, the fear she felt and the pain she suffered at the hands of this animal. The last vestiges of sympathy or remorse I may have had for this bastard disappeared with these thoughts.

I wanted something more to remember her by even though I possessed her shawl and her precious silver locket. I turned to the chest of drawers and opened the top one carefully. It was as disordered as the rest of the room and held only Harper's few items of outer and underwear. The middle drawer was empty save for an old tin can with some shirt studs in it.

The bottom drawer was filled with an old woollen, moth-eaten blanket. There was nothing of Sarah's in any of these drawers. Not a comb, not a glove, not a pair of shoes or stockings. The bastard had rid himself of his wife and all that reminded him of her.

I pulled the blanket aside and heard the clunk of metal against the side of the drawer. Lifting the blanket, I discovered an old revolver and a small canvas bag with a

dozen or so cartridges in it. The gun was loaded. If only Sarah had known of its existence, she may have been able to protect herself.

Knowing what my intentions were, I thought the gun would serve me better than leaving it here for the police to find so I slipped it and the canvas bag into my coat pockets.

I closed the drawer and stood up taking one last look about the room and a long look at the result of my promise to Sarah.

It was a long way back to my bed, both Whiskey and I exhausted by the long day and night. In a few hours, the sun would be rising bringing a new day for most in the colony of New South Wales, but not for one.

“Did you hear the news?” Patrick panted as he ran into the dining room. We had just sat down for our luncheon break when Patrick interrupted us. He sat in his usual place next to me and continued, spreading his napkin across his lap and helping himself to the food, “John Harper is dead.”

A gasp of horror echoed though the room.

“Yes,” he continued, “Brendan Rourke went to his place to collect him when he didn’t show up for work this morning and found him hanging from the roof beam. Suicide. There was a note that said he was sorry.”

“His conscience must have got to him,” offered Mr Morrison unsympathetically.

“Should have done it months ago,” I said vengefully, “then Sarah would still be alive.”

Everyone fell silent.

Patrick broke the silence, “Corporal Roberts told me that there were muddy footprints on the floor. He could have had visitors.”

“Or they could have been Rourke’s,” I suggested. “Are the police going to investigate or assume suicide just like they assumed Sarah’s death was an accident?” I sarcastically enquired.

Patrick gave me a strange, quizzical look and asked, “Why would they think otherwise?” then turned to his father, “Rourke’s in a state of apoplexy. Not only has he lost one of the few carpenters left in Sydney, but he’s lost the hefty advance he gave Harper

when he started the new job. Harper left nothing of any value except the few tools he hadn't yet pawned."

Patrick turned to me again and gave me a long, long look. I knew what he was thinking but I wasn't about to say another word and resumed eating my meal.

For the remainder of the day, I kept to myself and completed my chores quickly then retired to my room for my afternoon break after I had spoken to Mr Morrison in private. I wasn't there half an hour when a frantic knock on my door took my attention away from the list I was making.

"Come in, Patrick," I assumed.

Patrick closed the door behind him and sat on my bed. He didn't say a word and appeared to be struggling with his opening gambit.

"Just say it, Patrick."

"Pa just told me you're going away. Why? Where to?" he sounded hurt and I did feel for him.

"I need to get away from everything that reminds me of what happened."

"But this is your home. You've never been away. You've only ever gone as far as Manly and...and—"

"Parramatta?"

"You want to get away from me? From Pa?"

"No, Patrick, I don't want to get away from you or your father but, unless you both come with me, there's no other way," I half-heartedly joked, "I can't stay. I don't want to stay."

"Harper's gone. He's no longer a threat. Why must you leave?"

I pang of guilt squeezed my heart. I couldn't tell him; that would make him complicit in my crime—for what I had paid to be done was a crime and one for which I would surely hang, regardless of my reasons for doing it. I had to leave and not be found should the truth be discovered. "I need to find some peace, Patrick, and I won't find it here. Once I have achieved that, I will return, I promise."

"I'll come with you."

“And leave your father to manage the hotel that one day will be yours? Would that be the right thing to do, Patrick?”

His deflated look told me that he agreed. “When are you leaving?”

“After I’ve sorted out my room.”

“This room is yours. I’ll keep it for you... forever if necessary.”

I smiled in genuine gratitude and while I doubted that I would ever return, one could never foretell the direction one’s life’s path would take.

Patrick asked, “Where are you going to go?”

“Wales,” I lied, “Cardiff, to see where my mother was born and where she lived until she came here.”

“Well,” he said, “at the very least she left you with enough to take care of the passage and then some.”

“Yes,” I lied again, for most of my inheritance was used to pay for services rendered by the Push.

Patrick stood up and came over to where I sat. “You will come back, won’t you Becky? You are the only girl in this whole colony that I would ask to marry me.” He took my hand and guided me from my chair and into his arms, gently folding them around me.

I returned his gentle embrace and replied in all honesty, “And you are the only boy I would ever consider marrying.”

A few frantic days later, I was ready to travel. I had packed everything I needed in two red leather valises. For my own safety, I dressed in male clothing but had also packed a couple of skirts and bodices together with extra shirts and trousers. With much reluctance, I left all my precious books behind, save two.

I wore Sarah’s locket about my neck and Harper’s revolver was wrapped in Sarah’s shawl in one of my valises.

The buzz that surrounded Harper’s death had subsided and the police, according to Corporal Roberts, were to submit their report to the Coroner who would most likely return a finding of suicide, driven to it by the grief over the death of his beloved wife.

At last, I was ready to go. I stood in the middle of the room that had been my world since I drew breath eighteen years ago. I looked around and could see my mother reading to me; Sarah sitting beside me on my bed laughing at my silliness; Napoleon, as a puppy, gambolling about; these were happy memories filled with love...then darkness. I heard Sarah's screams, Napoleon's yelps, Harper's violent threats...

Patrick broke my trance, "Hey, Becky, the buggy's ready. Are you sure you don't want me to see you off at the docks?"

"No, Patrick, I don't want tears in public."

"It's all right for you to cry, Becky," he consoled.

"Not me, you!" I joked.

With his customary good humour, he prodded me in the ribs, which made me flinch; they were still quite painful. His immediate reaction was to apologise. I was going to miss him.

With a contrite look, he picked up my valises and we left. "You will write, won't you?"

"Every day."

I was finding it easier and easier to lie. What I didn't tell anyone was that I was not going to the docks but to the Cobb office in the town; that I was not going to the Mother Country but to Melbourne and the goldfields; that I would not write to Patrick or anyone else.
