



*And Those
Who Trespass
Against Us*

Helen Macpherson

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by

Helen M. Macpherson

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Chapter One 1872

THE MOMENT KATHERINE Flynn stepped from the train she knew something was wrong. The station was deserted--no stationmaster, no porter. She placed her bags down and glanced along the length of the platform. All was quiet, except for the wind which blew in a spiraling fashion along the platform, spreading dust in its wake. Observing her greater surroundings, she realised not only the station, but everything was covered in a fine film of dust.

She'd heard dust storms were a regular part of Australian country life, and were said to be more fierce than the Reckoning itself. Until now she'd never witnessed the effects of one, and had chosen to dismiss such descriptions as the Australian way of over exaggeration, something she'd frequently experienced since her arrival in Australia.

I've come a long way to be greeted by nothing but the wind, Katherine thought. She wistfully smiled. If someone had told her two years earlier that she would find herself in the remote Australian countryside, she wouldn't have believed them, for two years ago to the day had been her wedding day.

Katherine had been twenty-two when she'd finally succumbed to the parental pressures of finding a husband. The threats her mother weaved regarding a prospective life as a spinster were too much to bear. The problem being it wasn't marriage which was the greatest worry. In all honesty, she hadn't yet found someone who she could imagine spending the rest of her life with. That was until the day her father brought home a client who wished to continue business discussions which had not been finalised at the offices of Flynn and Company. Iain Fihilly was the only person Katherine had met who came close to what she expected in a lifelong companion and, so after the acceptable months of courtship had elapsed, she consented to marry him.

The day of their wedding was no different from any of the many other days she'd experienced in the countryside of Ireland. Gray and overcast, a light drizzle fell as the family coach approached the town church. Alighting from the coach, Katherine's hem dragged along the ground, causing a

brown ring to form at the base of the white silk gown. On reaching the ornately carved wooden doors of the ancient church, a flustered pastor informed her the groom hadn't yet arrived, but assured her of a good explanation for his non-attendance. Truth was--he wasn't coming. He had instead elected to elope with a younger woman who possessed not only good looks but also a sizable dowry. Thus, Katherine was left, a somewhat nonplussed bride, standing and listening to the weeping ravings of her mother in the minister's quarters of All Saints Church, in Kilmarne, Ireland.

Katherine's mother wouldn't be consoled and talked of nothing but the disgrace brought onto the Flynn name. In her own unsettled way, she placed the guilt for the farce of the wedding at Katherine's feet. Katherine, unable to spend her days living with the ranting of an unrepentant mother, packed her meagre belongings and left home the following day. She'd left no note, nor had she told anyone of her intended destination.

She walked out on her family and into a vocation guaranteeing never again would she be hounded to marry. This vocation, although not exactly of Katherine's choosing, provided a means of escape from her mother and the supposed shame brought on the family name. And so, Katherine spent her next twelve months at Our Sister of Mercy Convent. There she lived a frugal existence, no longer harassed by the social pressures strangling a woman of the 1870's. The sisters were a group who asked no questions, with most of their calling being exacting work, involving residence in countries far from Irish shores.

Nothing could have suited Katherine better when Mother Superior raised the matter that their work was again needed in Australia, and she was to replace the sister residing there. Mother Superior made it clear that she didn't have to go, for the sister stationed in the western New South Wales countryside was a woeful correspondent, and no one at the convent was fully aware of what life would hold in store for Katherine. The Mother Superior advised, once she arrived in New South Wales, if she didn't like her position in the young, flourishing state, it would take the convent some time to raise sufficient money to secure a return passage. What the Mother Superior couldn't know was that the opportunity presented Katherine with just what she needed to finally sever the ties with her old life, and she wholeheartedly grasped at such a fortuitous coincidence.

After an uneventful sea journey, save for the occasional bouts of seasickness, followed by an extremely slow four-day train trip, Katherine had eventually arrived at her destination--a deserted train station.

Chapter Two

THE SUN WAS stifling. God obviously didn't have Australia in mind when he invented this habit, Katherine thought. Beads of perspiration ran down the middle of her back, settling in a wet spot at the base of her spine.

Katherine walked the length of the platform, trying the two doors of the cement-rendered building. They were both locked. She rubbed the glass of one of the dust-covered windows to see if someone was inside and merely asleep. The room was bare except for a bench that travelled the length of the walls, its path only broken by a fireplace, centrally positioned against one of the walls. She stepped back and looked at the walkway to the left of the room, which formed an exit from the station. She glanced through the walkway and saw only dust-covered countryside. The place truly looked deserted. Katherine frowned. The town's sister knew she was arriving today. Why had no one come? Katherine thought she'd best wait. Despite the platform having a verandah, the time of day afforded little respite from the unrelenting heat of the sun.

Not clear on where she should go next, her only choice was to wait. She moved down the brick platform. Taking shelter in a recess in the wall, she made herself as comfortable as possible, and closed her eyes.

SHE AWOKE WITH a start, unsure of how long she had slept. A man in uniform, who could have only been the stationmaster, stood over Katherine. In his hand was a flask, the contents of which he was tilting towards her lips, as if he meant to pour the liquid down her throat.

"Thank heavens you're alive, Sister. Sitting here the way you were, I thought you'd fainted and died in the heat. Here take some water, but sip it, don't gulp it or you'll find yourself bringing it up again."

Katherine gratefully accepted the flask. She quenched her thirst, taking the time to look at the man. He wore a deep blue jacket and trousers which, like his surroundings, were covered in a fine film of dust. His uniform and hunched shoulders didn't strike her so much as his face; for she didn't believe she'd ever seen so many creases on a man's face. Even her Grandfather's face hadn't told the tale of hard years this one did. It was as if the wind, which had weathered so perfectly the surrounding landscape, had created this face also.

Katherine realised she was staring, like an inquisitive child. "Thank you. I don't know what happened. No one was here when I got off the train. At first, I thought the convent had sent me to a ghost town. I tried to get inside but the doors were locked."

The stationmaster looked at the doors and back to Katherine. "I'm sorry, but we had to lock the doors because..."

"That would be the 1:15 weekly train from Sydney," another voice said. "That was two hours ago. If you're going to live out here you're going to have to learn not to fall asleep in the sun."

Until then Katherine was oblivious to the presence of anyone but the stationmaster, and was surprised when a figure stepped out from behind him.

"How can you be expected to bear the heat with all those clothes on? What's that cloth?" The person reached forth and ran the fabric of the habit between two dusty fingers. "It looks like wool. If you want to survive more than a week out here you're going to have to find something lighter than that."

Katherine looked up, only now realising the station's other occupant was a woman. Her manner of speaking wasn't coarse; in fact her speech was impeccable. Yet the clothes which adorned her figure were bewildering and entirely unexpected for a woman. She wore no dress, favouring instead a pair of pants and a shirt. The trousers were a dusty brown colour, similar to the dust on the stationmaster's jacket, and were the same width all the way down her leg. The blue, dust-covered shirt looked like it had been fashioned from light cotton. The shirt covered a tapered upper body, accentuated by the woman's slender hips, giving her a no-nonsense air.

The woman herself was equally interesting. She was overly tall, for a woman, and her face was slightly square. Yet this didn't make her appearance harsh. Her face had been tanned by the sun, but hadn't yet begun to show the telltale signs of weathering, like the stationmaster's. Her hair, sensibly pulled away from her face and into a pigtail, was light brown in colour. The woman possessed no physical similarity to the stationmaster now standing quietly at her side. Katherine looked from one face to the other, again realising she was ogling.

Stiffly pulling herself up from her seated position and breaking her gaze from the woman in trousers, Katherine extended her hand to the stationmaster and introduced herself. "Excuse my rudeness. My name is Sister Flynn, Sister Katherine Flynn." She had risen too quickly and struggled to not fall down.

He offered a steadying hand. "James Nelson, Sister, and this is Miss Catriona Pelham. I know how tiring the journey is from Sydney, and then to arrive to this. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Thank you. That's very kind. However, after the tea do you think you could tell me where Sister Coreen is? I was expecting her to meet me this afternoon, as she was to show me to my living quarters. You must know her. Her full name is Sister Coreen Watson." Katherine didn't miss the look which passed between Mr. Nelson and Miss Pelham, and an unsettling feeling settled in her stomach.

"If it's Sister Watson you've come all this way for, then I'm afraid your journey has been wasted." Mr. Nelson looked at Miss Pelham for assistance.

Miss Pelham took up the story where Mr. Nelson had awkwardly stopped. "You would have to be blind not to notice everything is coated in dust. Earlier today, we had a dust storm which went on for about an hour. Being the main market day, a lot of people were in town when the storm hit. Most of those who came in from their properties, or farms as you would be more familiar with, took refuge in the Town Hall. What you must understand is our Town Hall is, or should I say was, no more than a wooden shack. At the height of the storm the wind whipped though the

town, uprooting trees and moving houses. Unfortunately the shops and houses which weren't strong enough either collapsed or blew away."

Miss Pelham stared into the distance, her face strained, as if she were reliving the events of the afternoon all over again. "The Town Hall was one of the buildings which collapsed, killing ten people and wounding many others. So, you see that's why no one met you. Every person who could still walk has been down at the hall sorting through the rubble for bodies and survivors. Most of the job was completed with only a section remaining when one of the workers heard the muffled sound of a crying child. When they pulled away the debris, they found the body of Sister Watson, and under her an unscathed girl. By the looks of it, she'd shielded her from the falling roof, dying in the child's place. She was quite dead when they found her. Probably killed by the impact of the roof." Miss Pelham paused and gazed around her surroundings as if to compose herself. "So if it's Sister Watson you're waiting for, I'm afraid you'll be waiting a long time. She's dead you see, gone forever." Miss Pelham turned, walked a few paces away, and stopped and stared out at the gaunt landscape.

"Although if you want to be of assistance there's something you could do," her voice carried back over her shoulder while she continued to stare into the distance. "Father Cleary who runs the church is away up north and not expected to return for a while. We can't leave dead bodies in the open for too long, or they'll turn."

"Turn, what do you mean by turn?"

Mr. Nelson awkwardly shuffled. "They will start to, er, be fouled by the hot weather."

Unsure of where the conversation was heading, Katherine looked from Mr. Nelson to the back of Miss Pelham. "What is it you want me to do?"

The woman turned, her tired blue eyes meeting Katherine's. "The dead need the appropriate prayers said over them prior to them being buried and, frankly, Sister Flynn, you're the closest we have to a town priest."

Katherine felt her jaw drop and she turned to Mr. Nelson. "I can't pray over them. I'm not ordained to do such a thing. I'm only a nun! Isn't there some way you can wait until Father Cleary returns?" Katherine pleaded. She felt the grip of a hand on her shoulder and she was wheeled around until she was merely inches from Miss Pelham's face.

"Look around you, Sister Flynn. The shimmering effect you can see in the distance is the heat. If the bodies are not buried by nightfall they'll attract the flies, which in turn will bring disease. It must be done now and at the moment you're the most a qualified person we have."

Katherine stepped back and away from Miss Pelham's angry form. "I don't think you realise, as a nun, I do not have the authority of the church to perform last rites. I can say nothing over them which would make their path into the hereafter assured. As a nun these words would have no religious significance."

"Do you think those people who are dead give a damn if it's you, me, or the town drunk who says final prayers for them?" Miss Pelham said, her eyes piercing Katherine's. "If I felt the matter could be resolved in such a way, then I'd do it myself. This is for their relatives who are still alive. They're looking for assurance, religious assurance their loved ones will be safe in the hereafter. You can give them such assurance. I doubt in this time of grief they care who you are, only that you're the nearest thing they have to a priest. I suggest you realise in Australia not all things fit the mould like they're supposed to. You're here for a long time if what Sister Coreen said is true. If that's the case, you can endear yourself to the townspeople now, or you can spend a very long and lonely time here."

"I understand what you're saying, but when Father Cleary returns," Katherine got no further.

"Sometime in the future the father will be back, and he can ensure everything is remedied from a religious perspective. Now I think we should be making a move." Affording her no time to object, Miss Pelham grabbed Katherine's arm, and propelled her through the walkway exit to the railway station.

Katherine again struggled to release herself from the vice-like grip. "What about my luggage? All I have is in those two cases."

"I've got them Sister." Mr. Nelson loaded the meagre luggage into the back of the wagon as Miss Pelham almost lifted Katherine onto the seat on the front of the wagon.

Mr. Nelson shook his head. "Miss Pelham, mark my words, one day your sharp tongue and forthrightness is going to come back to haunt you."

Miss Pelham picked up the reins. "And they'll be added to the growing list of troubles I already have."

She cracked the reins across the flanks of the horse. "Move on," she called, and the horse obeyed her bidding.

NOTHING COULD HAVE prepared Katherine for the sight of a town destroyed by a dust storm. The scene reminded her of a fairytale she'd read as a child, where an evil giant had stepped on an unsuspecting town, crushing it underfoot. Unlike the fairytale, for this town there didn't seem to be a happy ending. The desperation and pain on the townspeople's faces was the impetus she needed to finally understand Miss Pelham's sense of urgency. She felt guilty about her stubbornness on insisting she adhere so rigidly to the rules of the church when obviously what the townsfolk needed was comfort and reassurance. Katherine's first day in town was a whirlwind of activity, filled with praying for the dead, comforting the survivors, while also quietly mourning the heroic efforts of a nun she never knew. She wasn't sure what the father would say of her actions on his return, but she was ready to stand by her actions, and the situation she'd been unwillingly forced into.

When she wasn't tending to the spiritual comfort of others, she helped clear rubble or attempted to sweep away some of the incessant dust which stuck in the same manner flies in this country did. Despite the day's tragedy, through her work she was overcome with the most amazing feeling. For once in her life she felt part of something. Yet it was so much more than that. She was doing work which, in Ireland, would have been regarded as only men's work. Even in tragedies such as the mining disasters in her county back home, a woman's duties were restricted to making tea and sandwiches.

As she toiled amongst the ruins of so many lives, the sun continued to make its way across the sky until the remaining people laboured in dusk, and the first hint of a full moon filled the sky.

A man in workman's clothes clapped the shoulder of another younger man he'd been talking to. He turned to the workers stacking the remains of a building. "Listen, men, John's told me everyone's accounted for. We're losing light and I don't think there's anything else which can be done today. Besides, I think we could all do with some rest." A murmur from the group reinforced his last words. "Why don't you all head on home. We'll meet here again tomorrow to finish what we started."

Tired husbands searched for their wives and, on finding them, gave them hearty hugs. For those men, the relief that it hadn't been them who had lost a loved one was evident. After the last families drifted away, Katherine was left with Miss Pelham and the thought of where she would spend the night.

Katherine attempted to wipe the accumulated dust and blood from the front of her habit but quickly abandoned the idea after realising her hands were hindering rather than aiding her efforts. Lightly slapping her hands, in an attempt to dislodge some of the dirt, she looked at Miss Pelham in the fading light. "I expect I should be on my way home, if only I knew where my lodgings were."

Miss Pelham wiped her hands on the seat of her pants. She touched her hand to her head and looked around, as if searching for something. "Though it mightn't be much of a comfort now, the town had planned a more appropriate welcome than the one you received." She bent down, picked up her hat and placed it on her head. "Come to think of it though, at least this one was more realistic. Sister Coreen's *lodgings* are on the same road to my homestead. I should tell you she spent hardly any time there and her reasons for this will become more apparent when we get there. Hop on the wagon and we'll be on our way." Miss Pelham un-tethered the horse from where it had patiently waited throughout the day.

In the fading light, Katherine struggled to make out any of the features of the town. The shapes she could discern disturbed her. The Town Hall was only one of many buildings which suffered the brunt of the storm. If these dust storms were a regular occurrence, how could anyone endure this day after day?

Heading out of town they entered another area detached from the remains of the main community. The houses, or the structures which were still standing, were a mix of whatever material was convenient.

"These houses don't even compare to the size of the tenant houses on my family's estate. They look more like oversized doll-houses." Miss Pelham grunted and Katherine shrugged at her response. Although she couldn't readily describe it, Katherine was unsettled by the uneasy silence of the area. What disturbed her more was Miss Pelham pulling up the horse.

She slowed the wagon in front of what appeared in the early moonlight to be no more than a mound of tangled wood. "Here you have it. Sister Coreen's home or what's left of it. "

The abode was nothing more than shattered remains, another victim of the storm which had devastated the town only hours ago.

Katherine shook her head, finding it difficult to believe the pile of timber and corrugated iron had ever been a home. The realisation of what she was looking at dawned on Katherine, confusing her plans even more. Breaking her gaze from the woodpile, she turned to Miss Pelham. "This may have been where I was supposed to live, but it's quite obvious this is no longer possible. If it isn't too much of an inconvenience, could you take me to the father's residence? I'm sure he wouldn't mind if I spent a night in his home while he's away."

"Unfortunately the home Father Cleary used to live in was accidentally burnt down last summer by an overzealous housekeeper heating it for his return. Since then, the committee who oversaw the building of the first home has been saving money to construct another." Miss Pelham derisively snorted. "Not that it would be money missed out of their own pockets should they wish to open them. Father Cleary's current residence is the unmarried men's accommodation in town. I'm sure he'd be quite shocked to find you spending the night there, rather than sharing the hospitality of someone's home. You don't have to worry. You can stay with me until a more permanent arrangement can be made." She motioned the horse forward.

"Are you sure this isn't inconveniencing you in any way? I don't wish to cause you,"

Miss Pelham cut her off. "For heaven's sake, Sister Flynn, think of where you are and what time it is. It would be quite rude of me not to offer you lodgings for the night." She didn't break the forward movement of the horse and wagon. "Indeed, if I took you back to the Town Hall or the train station, my reputation with some members of the town would be even worse than what it already is."

What sort of reputation do you possess? Katherine thought. Although I expect now isn't exactly a desirable time for the production of personal references. "In that case thank you for your most generous offer, although I won't inconvenience you for any longer than necessary." Katherine settled herself into the hard wood seat. "You said the house, or the remains of it, was Sister Watson's home although she didn't spend much time there. If she didn't live there and there's no convent, where did she live?"

"She lived with me and my brother, Alexander, on our property. As you've seen, her house is not located in the best area of town. Apparently, one of the previous pastors, Father McGuire, decided that sisters who came to work in this country should take their vows of poverty literally. While he was cloistered in his comfortable residence, he supervised the building of the sister's

house in the poorest part of town. His idea wouldn't have upset the nun who was to be the recipient of the arrangement, except the house wasn't only situated in the poorest part of town but also in the most drunken and thieving area. Not surprisingly, Father McGuire didn't last long. The current father doesn't take the sister's vows of poverty so strictly. He allowed Sister Coreen to live with Alexander and me. She only ever used the house as a retreat for mothers from their drunken husbands." She craned her neck at the road. "There'll be plenty of time to talk once we reach Gleneagle. For now I need to concentrate on getting us home in one piece and before the bushrangers are out on these roads. If we keep going at this pace, we'll reach home in time to turn around again and return to town to assist in tomorrow's cleanup. Hang on Sister." She urged the horse into a greater, yet controlled, pace.

Katherine was grateful she heeded the advice. The next part of the trip was nothing like the carriage rides back home. Hurtling along at breakneck speed, the cool evening wind picked up her veil and flailed it in the breeze. Katherine assessed her options of using one hand to hold onto the side of the wagon while using the other to steady her veil. One of the wheels of the wagon hit a rut, causing her to momentarily leave her seat. She opted to hold on and let her veil fare for itself.

How could anyone drive at such a pace in such poor light? She opened her mouth to comment and, just as quickly, closed it. In the compressed time of her acquaintance with Miss Pelham, she sensed it would be against her better judgment to ask her to slow down. Besides, Katherine thought, this is her country. If anyone should know the standard of the road, then Miss Pelham should.

Still, Katherine didn't quite know what to make of Miss Pelham. She was so blunt at the station, and yet so gentle with the women and children who waited for their husbands at the end of the day. Despite being in the presence of men, she displayed a complete disregard for her own femininity. Katherine couldn't help but think there was more to the woman who sat beside her. Through the moonlight, Miss Pelham's pre-occupied determination was accentuated by the set of her jaw and the manner she sat forward in her seat, staring into the semi-blackness. Not once did Miss Pelham's concentration wander, and the determination in her face made Katherine feel afraid. Was this what living in this country did to women? Katherine resignedly held on, waiting for their eventual arrival. Luckily she didn't have long to wait.

The wagon slowed and turned, its wheels connecting with something metal that shook the wagon. Katherine yelped. "What was that?"

"It's nothing, just a cattle grid." She steered the wagon up a gently winding driveway. "It stops our herd from wandering out of the property when they're in the lower paddocks."

Katherine attempted to make out what was in front of her. Except for the ambient light of the moon, the darkness had all but engulfed them. Miss Pelham's stance relaxed and she slowed the horse's pace. Katherine finally made out the silhouette of a house.

"We're here." Miss Pelham brought the horse to a complete stop, and applied the hand brake. "If you wait, I'll come around and get you down."

"It's kind of you, but there's no need," Katherine said and then proceeded to fall off the wagon into the darkness. She hit the ground with a resounding thud.

"Are you all right?" Miss Pelham's tone was testimony to her frustration. "I told you I'd help you."

Flustered and embarrassed, Katherine reacted to the timbre of Miss Pelham's voice. "I heard you. I wasn't expecting alighting could be so difficult."

"Well, you're off now. Let's hope next time your landing onto *terra firma* is a much safer one." This time Miss Pelham's tone was more conciliatory.

"You speak Latin?"

"Why do you sound so surprised?" The irritation in her voice reasserted itself. "England isn't the only place where you can be educated."

"I did not mean for it to sound as it did." The lilt in Katherine's voice matched the Irish anger now bubbling to the surface. "And besides I'm not from England."

"I must say, I'm surprised! A sister with a bad temper. Such a temper should take you far in this country. About as far as the train station I expect."

"I don't believe this. You've brought me all the way out here, and now you're going to take me back to the train station? That's absurd!"

"If I was going to do that, you wouldn't be here at all. You've nothing to worry from me. I don't care how forward you are. Believe me, though, the rest of the townsfolk may not be so receptive to your blunt tone and *Irish* anger." She emphasised the country of Katherine's origin. "This conversation is getting us nowhere." She rubbed her hand across the back of her neck. "Besides, it's getting cold. Let's go inside and see if we can try again."

The sisters had constantly warned Katherine of her tendency to talk without first measuring her words so she hastened to say, "I'm sorry but it's been a long day for me. I think I'm a bit tired." Katherine pulled her two suitcases out of the back of the wagon.

"If you wait there, I'll tether the horse and be back. Then we can go inside and I'll fix us a brew or what you know better as a cup of tea." Miss Pelham turned and led the horse into the moonlight and across the yard.

"Is it possible I could also have a hot bath?" Katherine called after her. "I don't believe I've had a good hot bath since leaving Ireland." Driver and wagon blended into the shadows cast by the full moon.

It wasn't long and Miss Pelham had returned. "It might take a while, but I think a bath could be arranged." Miss Pelham opened the front door of the house and Katherine followed, suitcases in hand.

Inside, Miss Pelham reached for a lamp to provide some light to the room. "If you wait here, I'll light this lamp. Hopefully there are still some residual embers in the stove."

After a few moments, Miss Pelham returned, her features bathed in soft light. "First things first, let me show you to your room. It may not be what you're used to, but it's a bed and a private space all the same." She walked down the hall, the lamp casting a warm glow in front of her as the shadows played off the walls. Katherine picked up her bags and followed, stopping behind Miss Pelham when she opened a door. She motioned Katherine through the entrance.

Even by the lamp's illumination, Katherine was aware the room was more than she could have expected. "Thank you, this is quite nice and very spacious." She placed her bags on top of the bed. "If it hadn't been for your kindness I don't know where I would have been spending the night."

"Oh, I do," Miss Pelham replied with an air of assuredness. "You'd have been put up with one of the fine upstanding families of the town and forced to tell them tales of the Old Country all night." Using a taper, she lit the lamp on the bed stand.

"If that's the case, then thank you for rescuing me. You sound as if you don't have much time for the townsfolk. Have they done something to you to make you feel this way?" Katherine slipped into her more common role of religious confidant.

"Let's just say the fine, upstanding families' ideals of life and mine differ somewhat. If you like, I'll leave you with your belongings to unpack." Miss Pelham looked at the two meagre suitcases. "I've heard of travelling light but never as light as that," she muttered and turned to leave the room. "I'll finish seeing to the wagon and put some water on."

Katherine listened to the echo of footfalls as the other woman made her way through the house. She turned back to the room. Its overall size wasn't readily discernible, for the fingers of the lamp's light failed to reach much farther than its immediate surroundings. She moved the lamp onto the dressing table, using the mirror's reflection to increase the light's beam. Katherine gasped.

The room contained a bedside table, dressing table, hand basin, and a wardrobe. Sitting almost centrally in the room, and opposite a pair of full-length French windows, was a huge double bed. Oh my, she thought, what luxury it will be to be able to stretch out in this bed. Being a sister, and even as a daughter in a fine, country home, she'd never known the extravagance of a double bed. Such pleasures were normally reserved for wedded couples.

She longed to lie down. "Of course if I do that, I may not get up again." Shaking herself out of her self-indulgent musings, she pulled her Bible from her bag and sat, taking time to recite not

only her evening prayers, but prayers for the souls who had lost so much that day. Finally closing her Bible, she placed it on the dresser and began to unpack.

SATISFIED HER HORSE was settled for the night, Catriona returned to the kitchen, and the kettles she'd set to boil. She checked the tea kettle and took it off the direct heat of the wood stove. Replacing the lid of the larger simmering kettle, she left it to reach a boil and ambled out of the kitchen to retrieve the metal hipbath stored on the verandah. She paused and turned her face to the night sky. The sky was clear, lit by stars and a full moon. She sighed, finding it hard to believe the devastation that had been brought to bear on this part of the country today. Although country born, she never ceased to be in awe of the way nature could be so kind one moment yet, in the same breath of wind, so wanton. Shaking her head, she bent down, grasped the lip of the metal bath and dragged it toward the kitchen door.

"Miss Pelham, where are you?" Sister Flynn called, the lamp in her hands flickering in the dim light.

"I'm getting the bath. The job would be accomplished a lot quicker if you could help me get it into the kitchen."

Sister Flynn divested herself of the lamp and, moving beside Catriona, grabbed the edge of the metal bath and proceeded to drag it along the verandah toward the back door of the house.

"Where do we have the bath?"

"It's too unwieldy to take far so we usually bathe in the kitchen. Don't worry, I'll close the back door before you bathe." Catriona continued to push the lead-lined bath through the back door entranceway.

"Things are certainly done differently out here. I don't mean to sound prudish, but didn't you mention you shared this house with your brother? What happens if he should walk in during the bath?"

"Then I expect he'll see you in your full glory like God intended."

"I beg your pardon?"

Catriona held up her hand. "You needn't worry about him making an unexpected entrance. Alexander's away up north and isn't expected back for a few weeks yet. Your privacy, apart from me, is therefore assured." She brought the bath to a halt next to the stove. "While we're waiting for the bigger kettle to boil we'll have that cup of tea. If you don't mind, we'll take tea in the kitchen. It takes a while to light up the parlour. I'm sure, at this time of night, formalities can be dispensed with." She placed two vitreous beige mugs, sugar, and a tin of biscuits on the table. "Truth be told, with only Alexander and I in the house, the parlour is very rarely used."

"You may have misunderstood me," Sister Flynn said. "I'm comfortable with this welcome rather than one full of the social graces. After all, I'm a sister, not a social butterfly. I'm more used to this reception than you could possibly know."

Having allowed the tea to draw, Catriona poured the steaming liquid into the two mugs. She handed one to Sister Flynn. "That's good. You'll get both out here, so I suppose you can say you'll get the best of both worlds." She motioned toward the tin. "Have a biscuit."

Sister Flynn took one and sat silently munching on the sweet, golden-coloured oat biscuit.

Catriona silently reflected on the day's events and then eased herself out of her chair. She opened the stove door and placed another log on the fire. "Your water will take just a bit longer to boil. So, if you want to get your toiletries, I'll wait here and keep an eye on the water."

Sister Flynn rose. "Thank you. I might just do that. I shouldn't be long."

"No bother, take your time," Catriona replied as she settled back into her chair.

TAKING THE LAMP she'd earlier carried from her room, Katherine headed back through the house. She held the lamp high to cast light out in front of her and was distracted by a painting, which could have only been a portrait of the Pelham family. She paused to get a better perspective. The painting contained an elderly couple, most likely Miss Pelham's parents and, sitting in front of them, were a girl and boy. These she took to be Miss Pelham and her brother. Miss Pelham's dress reminded Katherine of a time when she wore such things. The striking green colour set off Miss Pelham's face in a much different way than what Katherine had witnessed since her arrival in the town. Entranced by the painting, Katherine jumped at the sound of a door closing. Realising her bath would soon be waiting, she continued through the house.

Katherine returned to the kitchen in short time and put her small bundle of toiletries on the table. "I couldn't help but notice the painting in the hallway, when I was going to my room."

Miss Pelham heaved the unwieldy kettle two-handed off the stove, and walked to the bath. She poured the hot water into the vessel in front of her. "As you've probably guessed, that's my family. When we have some more time, I'll tell you about them. But if we do that now your water will get cold.

Katherine released a silent prayer of thanks at the tendrils of steam rising from the surface. "Oh, of course."

Miss Pelham motioned at the jug on the sink. Add cold water as you see fit. I'll be in my room so you can bathe in private, but if you need me then yell. The house is not so big I won't hear you." Miss Pelham sidestepped Katherine and continued down the hall.

Katherine's bath was just the cure for a long train journey, during which she'd spent her time bathing out of a bowl. This coupled with her day of hot and dirty work, made her ablutions border on decadent. It had been a long time since she'd been allowed so much time to herself to just think. She traced a circle in the water's soapy surface. She wondered what sort of brother would go away and leave his sister on a farm for so long. She was certain Miss Pelham could look after herself, but why such a long journey?

After a time Katherine felt guilty about reclining in such liquid luxury, especially given Miss Pelham hadn't had a bath after her hard day. Quickly determining that she'd washed the dirt and perspiration from her tired limbs, she stepped out of the bath and shivered. She reached for her towel, surprised at how cool the air had become. She looked at her meagre bathing belongings on the kitchen table and sighed. "I must have left my nightgown on the bed." She covered herself as best she could with the undersized towel, continuing to shiver at the scant warmth the towel afforded.

Feeling a trifle embarrassed she called out to her host, "Excuse me, Miss Pelham, are you there?"

Katherine had barely finished when a reply came from the other side of the door. "Yes, what is it?"

"I'm sorry but I've left my nightgown on the foot of my bed in the guest room. Could you get it for me, please?" Katherine waited for a reply, but instead heard footfalls moving away from the door. It wasn't long and Miss Pelham had returned.

"I have it here, do you mind if I open the door?"

"Of course not." Katherine tried to ensure she was decent as possible, given her decency was currently restricted by the length of a towel.

The door opened barely wide enough to accommodate a head and a hand. "I hope this is what you wanted," Miss Pelham said, her eyes downcast and her outstretched hand holding a threadbare nightgown.

"Thank you very much. It was silly of me not to bring everything." Miss Pelham looked decidedly uncomfortable. "Are you all right?" Katherine asked.

"Yes," murmured Miss Pelham. "I think I'm tired after such a long day."

"I'm finished with the bath now, and I expect you'd like one too. If you could wait while I get changed I'll help you empty the bath and draw a fresh one." Katherine turned her back to Miss Pelham, affording herself some privacy to slip into her nightgown.

"There's no need. I'll top up yours with a bit of hot water. Miss Pelham came into the room and busied herself with the fire. "Unfortunately we don't have enough water to afford the luxury of fresh baths all the time. Besides, as long as the dirt comes off it doesn't matter all that much."

Having finished lacing the front of her nightgown, Katherine turned to Miss Pelham, and ran one hand through her wet, cropped curls. "In which case, is there anything else I can help you with?"

Miss Pelham balked at the question and, for a fraction of a second, Katherine saw her features change, as though she dropped her guard, but with the same speed with which it had faltered, she quickly regained her composure. "No, thank you, I should be right now." Miss Pelham turned to lift the water kettle from the fire.

She looked at the back of Miss Pelham with curiosity, almost sure she was about to say something. Why had she turned her back? Was everything all right? Although her education in the convent had taught her to pursue such matters, the hour was late. At that moment Katherine didn't feel strong enough to listen to the troubles of yet another person. She felt all she'd done all day was listen to problems. Katherine caught herself, guilty at such feelings, but knowing her tiredness currently overrode her guilt.

"I think I'll go to bed. Good night and thank you once again for extending to me the courtesy of your home." The nuns had taught Katherine the last phrase as a convenient way to end a meeting. She wasn't entirely sure she'd used it in its right context, but found again she was too tired to care. Lifting her lamp, she wound her way through the house to her bedroom and said the necessary prayers and climbed into bed.

CATRIONA LISTENED TO Sister Flynn's footfalls recede. Only then did she trust herself to turn from the fire and look in the direction she had taken. Her face felt flushed, which wasn't unusual when one stood so close to a fire. Only Catriona knew that the warmth of the fire had nothing to do with the heat radiating in her cheeks.

Chapter Three

KATHERINE AWOKE EARLY the next morning to a cacophony of birds outside her window. Never having heard such a raucous noise in her life, she placed her shift around her shoulders and headed across the room. The tree outside was full of at least a hundred white birds, their heads adorned with an impressive feather comb of sulphur yellow. "You're like washerwomen on market day, shouting and singing at the same time."

The morning sun's rays beaming through the French windows enabled her the first daylight opportunity to view her surroundings. Brown-green grass, which dominated the landscape as far as she could see, was interspersed with lofty trees of white bark and green leaves, called gum trees--as she'd learned on her train trip. She wistfully smiled. "It certainly isn't the rolling hills of Ireland."

Her stomach grumbled as she walked to her dresser. Deciding a cup of tea and breakfast might be in order, she pulled a shawl over her nightgown and quietly walked through the house, mindful of not waking Miss Pelham.

CATRIONA LOOKED UP when the door to the kitchen opened. "Good morning, Sister. I was beginning to wonder if you were going to get up at all." Catriona stood and reached for an extra teacup.

"Thank you." Katherine took the cup. "I'm sorry. I didn't realise you rose so early. Is it customary out here in Australia?"

"It's not so much customary, as necessary. There aren't enough daylight hours to get all the chores done and sleep in as well. Alexander and I normally only employ additional workers for the harvest and divide the chores between us the rest of the time." Catriona poured Sister Flynn's tea. "Plus, it gets so hot here in the summer you can't work through the heat of the day. Honestly, I could think of nothing better than to go to bed and not have to worry about what I had to do the next day."

"Then I expect these early mornings are something I'll have to remember, Miss Pelham."

Catriona held up her hand. "Before we continue, there's something I need to explain. When I was a child, a particular governess educated Alexander and me. This continued until Alexander was seventeen and I was fourteen. For all the years she taught me, she never called me anything but Miss Pelham. I didn't like her very much and I *hated* being called Miss Pelham. I'm somewhat older now, but I've never grown to like such formality. Please call me Catriona."

"I'll do the courtesy of calling you Catriona only if you'll address me as Sister Katherine when the situation demands it. From what I experienced yesterday, Australians are generally more at home calling sisters by their first name rather than their last. I'm more than comfortable with such an arrangement. I'd be grateful though, if on all other occasions you'd call me Katherine." She sat back in her chair and sipped her tea.

"Then it's a deal, Katherine." Catriona extended her hand.

"I expect it is, Catriona." Katherine grasped the hand in front of her. "I hope you don't think me too forward, but isn't it strange for you to be all alone out here? Where are your parents now? Are they now living in town? I also remember you mentioning last night that your brother lived with you but he's away at the moment."

"I told you last night I'd explain things when we had time, and I suppose now is as good a time as any.

It may be easier for me to start at the beginning." Catriona made herself comfortable. "We have two types of weather out here. One is drought and the other is flood. About three years ago we

hadn't seen rain for ages, and the whole country dried up, leaving behind soil as hard as iron. Then one day the clouds gathered over. They promised rain, but there had been so many times before when such promises hadn't been fulfilled. Unfortunately this time it did rain. The downpour wasn't the soft summer shower I expect you're used to. And the clouds, when they finally filled weren't black. They were green--green and full of hail. At the height of the storm, the rain came down in torrents so thick you couldn't see outside to the water pump. Flowing fast and hard, the ground had no time to absorb the water and so it ran into the creeks. The creeks couldn't hold the deluge and many rivers, already full of dead trees and branches, burst their banks.

"What you must understand is, at first, the day was quite normal. Although clouds filled the sky, they were wispy and very high up, holding not even a hint of any long awaited rain. It so happened that day was my parents' anniversary and my father chose to take my mother for a picnic. From what we could piece together, they didn't reach their picnic spot when the first light rain began to fall. Rather than have their picnic they must have turned for home. They were almost here when the full fury of the storm hit. Do you remember crossing a grate last night?"

Katherine nodded.

"The grate covers a moderately deep ditch which you need to cross to gain entrance to the property. It's not a very deep crossing but on that day it must have been deep enough. My parents were coming across the grate when the horse shied, most probably from a lightning strike, and fell into the ditch, carrying the buggy and my parents with it. The doctor concluded that my father died almost instantly for his neck was broken, but my mother drowned. When they found her, both her legs were horribly fractured and this could only have happened in the initial fall. Given her injuries, I suspect she was incapable of moving out of the path of the rising waters. She was carried down the river with her body finally being found in the forked trunk of a tree."

Katherine reached across the table. "I'm so sorry. I didn't realise you'd lost them both."

Catriona ignored Katherine's hand. Despite the passage of time, she still struggled to contain the pain that came with telling the story of her parents. "After their funeral, Alexander and I decided to stay on and work the property. My parents had been here the better part of their lives. So we decided we'd also try to make a living out of the land. He looks after any long distance business, only because no man would be seen dealing with a woman. He also attends social events that require a male presence, particularly a *marriageable* male. I tend to the property when he's away. When he's here, we work as a team. Alexander looks a lot like me except he's older."

"I can see their loss has deeply hurt you. I expect being here with your brother gives you great pleasure though."

Catriona smiled at Katherine's attempts to redirect the conversation to a lighter topic. "It does. Even though we're siblings and he's a little older, we're the best of friends."

"Is your brother conducting a social visit now, visiting a lady friend perhaps?"

"No, he's not. In fact he's already engaged to someone, but not someone miles away. She lived in this town." Catriona brought her hands to rest on the table and looked directly at Katherine. "Her name was Coreen Watson, commonly known around here as Sister Coreen."

Katherine shook her head, her face a study of disbelief. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand. A nun, when she's accepted into the church, marries God. She wears a ring." She held up her hand. "Like the one I wear. How could she have consented to marry your brother after already taking such vows?"

Catriona rolled her eyes. "There you go, getting on your religious high horse. It's different out here. Things are not as cut and dry as they are in England, excuse me, *Ireland*. Do you honestly think Coreen came all the way out here for the sole purpose of breaking her vows? That's not at all how it happened." Catriona leaned across the table. "In life no one is perfect and nothing, excepting death, is permanent. There's room for mistakes in everyone's life and Coreen's mistake was marrying into the church. Surely your all seeing and all forgiving God can realise an honest mistake has been made and accept it must be rectified?"

Katherine stood and paced the room, gesticulating at no one in particular. "I don't know what to accept. I come all the way out here from Ireland and arrive at a deserted train station, nearly die from the heat, spend yesterday afternoon saying the last rights of a father, find I've no real lodgings, and the sister who was supposed to help me settle has passed away. And, even if she'd lived, she wouldn't have been a sister for long because she was getting married? I can't help but wonder whether my coming to this town was all a mistake."

"I'm sorry you feel that way. You're sorely needed out here. I hate to throw your religion back at you, but isn't your first duty to others and not yourself?" Catriona challenged, staring at Katherine. "Aren't you only thinking of one person at the moment?"

Katherine sank into her chair. "I'm sorry I didn't mean for it to sound like that, but it's, oh, I don't know." She put her head in her hands. "The situation I've found myself in is not what I expected it to be."

"I'm sorry I was so abrupt," Catriona softly replied. "I think I understand how you must be feeling. It's a long way to come and be met the way you were yesterday. I understand enough of your religious life to know it's centred on a set of common principles. At the moment I expect you feel as if those principles have been scattered to the four ends of the earth." Catriona's face softened. "But please don't let that prejudice your overall opinion of Sister Coreen, Alexander, or me. How about I fix us some breakfast and we can talk some more."

Katherine's head remained in her hands.

"Whether you believe it or not you're wanted and needed out here. I saw you working yesterday. You've a natural affinity with the people of this town. They opened up to you and, believe me, it's not something they do lightly. Don't go until you've at least had time to see the town in a better light. As for your accommodation, you're welcome in this house for as long as you wish. Please think about it while I make you some breakfast."

No words passed between the two while Catriona prepared breakfast. She busied herself with frying up two generous slices of bacon, whilst searching her own thoughts. Why do I want her to stay? Is it because, recently, other than Susan and Coreen, she's the only other woman I've felt comfortable with?

Catriona placed a plate with a mound of eggs, bacon and tomatoes in front of Katherine and slid another across the table to her own place. "I hope you're hungry. Alexander and I usually only have two big meals a day--breakfast and dinner."

Katherine blinked and she looked up at Catriona. "Thank you. I am quite hungry."

Catriona lifted the hot fry pan off the top of the wood oven. Out of the corner of her eye she realised Katherine was waiting for her to take her place at the table. "Don't let your food get cold. Please go ahead."

"I was waiting for you to sit down so I could bless the meal."

"Then I suggest you start eating now. Since the death of my parents, I've never had my meals blessed, nor have I entered a church. I am one lost soul you'll never retrieve, *Sister*."

"So be it. I'll bless my own," Katherine said while Catriona continued to clean up the breakfast mess she'd made.

Silence hung between the two as they ate. Taking the opportunity the silence presented, Catriona surreptitiously viewed Katherine. Her face sported a scant sprinkling of freckles, the supposed bane of every good lady. Her brown, curly hair was cropped in a manner normally associated with women in religious orders. By the looks of her face and given where she's come from, she can't be more than twenty-five or twenty-six, Catriona thought. If she wants to maintain such a complexion then she's going to have to find something more to protect her than her veil and wimple. And who cut her hair? I could've done a better job with a pair of sheep shears. The most amazing thing about her though is her eyes. They look like the deep green emeralds my mother used to wear on special occasions.

Catriona realised she'd been caught staring and gulped down the last of the mouthful she'd been chewing for the past minute. "How's your breakfast?"

"It's fine, thank you. You're quite a good cook. Unfortunately, I've never been able to master the art of cooking. The nuns who trained me found this out early in my training and ensured I was never relegated to kitchen duties. Mind you, it did take one meal for them to realise this." Katherine placed her knife and fork beside the plate. "I'm sorry for my reaction earlier. I didn't allow you to finish the rest of your story. How did Father Cleary react to the news about your brother and Sister Coreen?"

"At the beginning he was all thee's and thou's, fire and brimstone, as you were a moment ago. He warned Coreen against the dire consequences of divorcing the church to marry a man. When he finally saw them together he realised their relationship wasn't just a stage in Coreen's life. Under

the auspices of his own church, he couldn't condone the union. However, he did advise the two of them. He advised Coreen she shouldn't rush into such a marriage, no matter how right it felt. He asked her to wait until you arrived and she could discuss the consequences with you. His advice to Alexander was to find a church and priest willing to marry them. I know Alexander found this hard to accept, but decided to go along with the father's decision. In fact that's where he is now, attempting to find a priest.

"Don't get me wrong. He's not desperately scouring the countryside. If they couldn't find someone local, then they intended to go to Sydney and get married. Once they were married, it wouldn't matter what the people thought. And, truth be told, it certainly wouldn't have bothered them."

"I don't know what the father expected me to do. It's very likely Coreen wouldn't have listened to me anyway. Besides, what business of mine would it have been to come all this way and stop her from marrying your brother? I'm sorry for my abruptness earlier, especially given how you must be feeling about the loss. Have you given much thought to what you propose to tell your brother when he returns?"

"I haven't, and I'm not exactly sure when he'll be home. Hopefully between now and then I'll come up with some way to break the news." Catriona rose to clear the table. "I expect there are more immediate things to think about, like washing up and getting back to town. There's still a lot to do."

"You're right." Katherine rose. "I'll help you if you like, and then I'll get dressed for the day."

WASHING UP FOR two wasn't like some of the wash ups Katherine had endured at the convent. The chore had been the bane of her existence in Ireland, but she didn't feel right leaving Catriona to look after the mess. Once finished she returned to her room with a pitcher of water and filled her hand basin to attend to her own ablutions. Having read her daily passage from the Bible, she turned, somewhat reluctantly, to place on her number two habit. "I can't possibly wear the one I arrived in, given how stained and dirty it is." She sighed. "I expect it won't be long before they're both as dirty as each other."

Using the remains of the water in her basin, she attempted to sponge off the stains on her soiled habit. Satisfied she'd done as much as she could, she carried both the water and the habit out the back of the house and looked for somewhere to hang the garment.

Catriona had hitched the horse to the wagon. The wagon itself was indicative of most things Katherine saw around the farm. Its primary conventional purpose was clearly to carry stores and produce, with its secondary purpose being the transportation of humans. Katherine hung her habit over the clothesline to dry and headed toward Catriona to see if she could lend a helping hand.

"Right, that's done." Catriona turned and almost ran into Katherine. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you coming. Are you all right?"

Katherine straightened her veil and wimple. "I'm fine, nothing broken."

"If that's the case, I think it's time we educated you on the ways of the bush. Today I'm helping with the rest of the cleanup in town, and this will give you the opportunity to meet the town's matriarchs."

Katherine frowned. "How do they know I'm here?"

"I sent a messenger to them yesterday to let them know you'd safely arrived and that I'd bring you into town today. Anyway, I don't go into town on a regular basis and when I do it's normally astride a horse. You, on the other hand, will find your trips around the immediate countryside to be a lot more frequent. So, your first lesson will be how to manage a horse and wagon. I'll leave the more difficult task of rigging them for travel for a later time. On the table on the verandah is a pair of gloves. I suggest you wear them, for the reins can cause quite a few blisters on soft hands." Catriona placed a mechanical implement in the back of the wagon. "Is there anything you wish to take into town with you?"

"I don't think so," Katherine called over her shoulder while she looked for the pair of gloves. She put them on and made her way back toward the wagon.

"The first thing you have to learn is to use both hands when getting on and off. That was your mistake last night, trying to get off too quickly. Now hop up there and we'll start lesson number two."

Katherine gathered her habit and hitched a small length of it into her belt to ensure her feet were unimpeded. She grabbed the wagon with both hands and climbed aboard. "Sorry about last night. I was a bit terse. But then I'm not used to falling off wagons."

Catriona eased into her seat and grasped the reins with both hands. "I don't think anyone is, are they?" They shared a laugh. "The second thing to learn is how to hold the reins. Don't hold them too far apart or the horse won't know what you want him to do. He relies on you, through the reins, to direct him. If they're too loose he'll wander." Catriona handed over the reins to her. "Now you try. Hold them like I did and you shouldn't have a problem."

Katherine attempted to weave the leather through the third and fourth finger of her hands like Catriona had demonstrated. She initially found the procedure quite difficult, but after some amount of floundering she was satisfied she'd succeeded. Turning to Catriona for assessment was the worst thing she could have done. The motion of her turning body resulted in the lines of the horse being snapped accidentally, causing horse and wagon to lurch forward. The horse, assuming they were on their way, broke into a light canter.

Katherine whipped her head and eyes around to the front. "What do I do now?"

"Unless you wish to go straight through the fence, you'll have to wheel the horse's head," Catriona said, her voice laced with amusement.

Katherine swung the reins above her head, in attempt to regain control of the horse. "Wheel! What do you mean?"

"It means turn the horse." Catriona calmly grabbed Katherine's hands and placed them in her lap. "Keep your hands close together, down in your lap, not above your head as if you were dancing a jig. Move one of the reins slightly toward you and, most of all, don't shout. You'll scare the horse. Right, now pull the left rein toward you and you'll see the horse's head will turn."

Katherine who had never controlled any form of gig was amazed. The horse's head turned and so the wagon followed.

As the horse lightly trotted in ever decreasing circles, Catriona eased Katherine's left hand back toward her right. "You've skipped a number of lessons, so we'll go back to your final lesson on the wagon and that's how to stop it. Slowly ease both reins toward you. At the same time, tell the horse you wish to stop by saying 'whoa.' Then I'll put the brake on." Catriona guided Katherine's hands back.

"Whoa!" said Katherine. The horse slowed and came to a complete halt. "That was exciting. I've ridden in coaches when I was at home, but I've never actually driven one. It can be most invigorating."

Although they had stopped, Katherine looked down to where Catriona's hands still held her own. Her hands were so delicate, compared to Catriona's. "Shouldn't you be putting the brake on now? Catriona, are you all right?" Katherine's eyes alternated between Catriona's face and their hands.

Catriona released Katherine's hands as if they were hot coals. "I'm fine. I was daydreaming." She pushed on the brake with her foot. "Based on the success of today's lesson, I better drive into town today. Don't worry though. You'll be doing this soon enough, especially if you're going to stay here for any amount of time."

Katherine smiled. "Thank you very much for the first lesson. At least with you driving I'll be able to concentrate on where we're going. Last night was far too dark for me to see much of anything."

Leaving the property, Katherine saw the countryside to the right of the wagon primarily consisted of gently undulating hills, covered with a brown-yellow straw-like grass. "What's that?"

"It's wheat. It's a staple crop in this part of the country."

The wheat undulated with the wind's hypnotic dance, swaying in time to an invisible beat. It made the paddock come alive.

On the other side of the uneven road, the grass was a brown-green colour. "That's the same colour grass I saw when I woke up this morning. Is the colour because of the lack of rainfall?"

Catriona nodded.

Katherine shrugged, assuming Catriona's nonverbal answer to mean she was more pre-occupied on the task at hand. She continued to look around.

Affording minimal shade in the paddock were groups of trees, which couldn't honestly be called a copse in the Irish sense of the word, and grazing away in the middle distance were a group of the most unusual animals Katherine had ever seen. She'd first seen them on the train trip. Having stood up from her seat to stretch her legs, she'd gone out onto the train's back platform in time to see these great grey creatures with two legs and a massive tail bounding up the hill away from the train. At that exact moment, the conductor had come to the back platform and told her they were kangaroos.

The kangaroos didn't sense danger from the passing wagon, instead content to graze on what sparse vegetation abounded in the paddock. Only one kangaroo paused in his repast. Lifting his head, he looked in their direction. Obviously satisfied by the absence of an immediate threat, he lowered his head and continued to graze.

CATRIONA WAS LOST in her own thoughts. She'd seen this countryside too many times to longingly gaze at it every time she travelled across it. Its purpose was to maintain cattle and grow wheat along with other crops. The countryside's aesthetics rarely entered the equation. And this morning she paid it even less attention.

Although outwardly calm and composed, her mind was racing. It's happening again! It had felt like a lifetime since she'd felt the same stirring of emotions she was experiencing. Although she'd hated her first governess with a passion, the same couldn't be said of her second governess. When her mother realised she wasn't growing out of the normal tomboy stage most girls brought up on a farm go through, Adele Cooper had been employed by the Pelham family to refine Catriona. Elizabeth Pelham had realised, if Catriona were to have any chance of securing a husband, she would first need the rough edges removed.

At seventeen, Catriona balked at the idea of another shrivelled up governess, employed to force her away from her love of working outside. She was pleasantly surprised. Adele was not much older than her, and they quickly became comrades in arms. Adele taught Catriona the finer graces of music, poetry, and art. While Catriona hesitated at the first two, in art she exhibited a natural affinity. Her mother was relieved she'd finally discovered a liking for something socially acceptable for a woman. Catriona and Adele spent hours in the countryside, painting it from all perspectives. Over the following months, her skill with watercolours became more developed, and she created paintings from strength within.

Yet overnight and without warning, she again grew sullen and distant to everyone and, in particular, Adele. Her mother, concerned by her mood, confronted Catriona. In awkward sentences, Catriona explained she was afraid she liked her new governess too much. Her mother assured her such feelings were natural for girls to have. It was no more than a stage all girls went through, and one which they quickly grew out of when they married. Her mother went so far as to tell her she'd in fact had a crush on her governess when she was fifteen. This quietly confused Catriona, given her own age was now closer to eighteen than fifteen. Rather than try to speak further with her mother about her feelings, which even at the best of times was a difficult task, she let the topic rest. Satisfied that what she was experiencing wasn't out of the ordinary, she returned to her art classes with Adele.

The weeks passed and Catriona grew closer to Adele who acted like she was, at times, at odds with how to deal with the situation. Adele became more circumspect about the time and contact she shared with Catriona.

Sensing Adele was more content spending time with Alexander, Catriona hit upon a plan to draw her back into her own circle. She'd often told Adele of a spot, about half a day's ride away, which presented a wonderful opportunity for painting. After repeated assurances to her mother that the place was still on the property and both women could cope with staying out overnight, they set off one morning for the spot Catriona had often spoken about.

The wagon was packed as if they were going for a year, not a couple of days. The sun was past mid-way when they eventually came in sight of a familiar group of trees. The surroundings were just as Catriona remembered. The trees shielded from the casual observer the natural treasure within, and served to create a hideaway from the outside world, a fact Catriona most enjoyed. When life and problems on the property were too much to bear, she'd often escape to this place. Now she was sharing it with Adele.

Searching along the outside of the trees, she eventually found the break that led them to the inside of the grove and the waterhole. The overgrown track was hard for the wagon and team, for the trees had long since encroached on the path. The unyielding progress of leaf and vine made the place so dear for Catriona. It didn't matter what she tried to do to tame the waterhole and its surroundings, nature always came back to reclaim its own.

Catriona heard Adele catch her breath. The waterhole, fed by a bubbling spring at one end, took up most of the enclosure. The surrounding trees were full-grown and healthy from the abundant water supply. To the left of the wagon was a clearing, not much bigger than the wagon. She brought the horses to a halt next to the clearing.

No longer encumbered by the noise of the constant movement of the wagon, the sound of the native birds could be heard echoing through the trees.

Adele scanned her surroundings. "It's beautiful and so private. How does it manage to survive in such a sparse country? It's amazing."

"I'm not quite sure, but father believes this spot here, and water bores in the local area, are fed by artesian water." Catriona alighted from the wagon with one of the many blankets her mother had packed. "We'll have to set up a shelter for the night, but first things first. I'll spread this so we can have some lunch. After all, it's been a long ride."

"Let me help you." Adele got off the wagon and grabbed the picnic basket, bringing it to where Catriona spread the blanket. Adele looked toward the spring occupying the greater part of their hideaway. "I know you must be hungry but our long ride has left me quite hot. The water looks far too inviting. Before we eat, would you like to go for a swim?"

Catriona faltered. She loved the water but she'd never learnt how to swim. She had little problem with wading her feet in the creek near home, but she was unsure how deep this waterhole was. Fearing she would be less in Adele's eyes she said the first thing which came into her mind, "I can't. I haven't brought anything to swim in."

"Neither have I," Adele replied. "Are you expecting anyone out here?"

"N-no."

"In that case I'm going to bathe in my chemise."

Adele began to undress and Catriona turned away. She felt backed into a corner. To delay the embarrassment at her own inadequacy, she slowly peeled off her outer garments.

Try as she might she couldn't help her eyes from wandering in Adele's direction. She looked so different when she wasn't wrapped up in lace and crinoline. Stealing a look toward Adele's chest, Catriona caught her breath. She felt ashamed when she thought of her own breasts, for they had only begun to fill out, yet still they didn't show much promise. They would never be like Adele's. Hers were beautiful.

"Are you coming in?" Adele called over her shoulder as she walked toward the bank. Without waiting for an answer, she waded in until all that Catriona could see were her shoulders. She paused, as if taking her bearings, then dived headlong into the water.

Catriona rushed toward the waters' edge. Adele was nowhere to be seen. Frantic, she waded into the water in search of her. What if she was struggling, caught in the reeds off the bank? She wouldn't be able to help. She couldn't swim. "Adele where are you? Are you all right?"

Like a bolt out of the blue, Adele surfaced directly in front of Catriona, her hair clinging tightly to her shoulders. However this wasn't the only thing clinging to her body. The plain cotton chemise which had been opaque only moments before was now translucent. The lower part of Adele's body was concealed by the water, but her upper half was quite exposed. The damp cloth now outlined Adele's breasts, her brown nipples visible, pressing against the cotton material.

Catriona blushed. She slowly broke her gaze, moving it up Adele's body and bringing her eyes to rest on the enigmatic expression masking Adele's face. She was smiling, yet at the same time was trying hard not to.

"I said are you going to stand in the water all day or are you going to come in for a swim? The water is lovely and cool, just what you need."

Catriona lowered her eyes. Being caught didn't embarrass her, and neither did the feeling created in her body as a result of her staring. What mortified her was her own inadequacy. "I can't swim."

Adele folded her arms across her chest. "I see. That's not a problem. The water we're standing in is only waist deep. Let me teach you."

Catriona bit her lip.

"What's the matter?" Adele gently asked. "Don't you trust me? I won't hurt you, I promise."

Catriona avoided Adele's stare. "It's not that. You don't want to have to fuss over me. It'll spoil your afternoon."

"You're wrong, Catriona, it doesn't bother me to fuss over you. And besides, my afternoon would certainly be spoiled if I had to think of you sitting on the bank."

Catriona was heartened by Adele's words and couldn't help but think no one ever worried over her. As a girl she was left very much to her own devices. Adele was right. The water was refreshingly cool. Head bowed, she nodded.

"That's better. I promise I won't let you drown. Now the way I'll teach you is I'll support you in the water by placing my arms under your waist. I then want you to concentrate on two things. First I want you to stroke the water like this." Adele showed her the move. "Then I want you to kick at the water with your legs like so." She demonstrated yet again. Adele looked deeply into Catriona's eyes. "You must trust me, I won't let you drown."

At that moment Catriona felt she could trust Adele with her life. In the beginning the lesson went well. She felt Adele's strong arms supporting her in the water. The stroking with her arms was progressing and her efforts, coupled with Adele's reassuring words, made her confidence grow. When Catriona decided to incorporate the kicking part of the lesson, things rapidly spiraled out of control. Her body rocked from side to side, yet if she could only kick harder maybe this would stop.

Catriona kicked so violently she rolled away from Adele's arms. Sensing she was sinking, she panicked and wildly thrashed about. Adele's other arm encircled her waist in a vice-like grip and pulled her upright. Leaning into Adele's shoulder Catriona began to cry.

Despite her tears, Catriona felt secure in Adele's arms. Although she clung to her, for fear of falling back into the water, what was more compelling was she couldn't think of anywhere else she'd rather be. Calming down, she felt emotions surging through her she'd never felt before. Tingling sensations coursed through her body.

Catriona felt soft kisses being placed on the top of her head, and she broke the embrace and looked into Adele's eyes.

Adele reached up and wiped the moisture from Catriona's tear-stained face. "I should have never made you come into the water. You should have stayed on the bank where it was safe."

"I couldn't think of a more secure place than being here with you. The fault was mine. I shouldn't have been so eager to learn."

For a moment the surroundings faded into the background, and all that mattered was Adele. She brought her face down and ever so slightly brushed Catriona's lips with her own, igniting a fire inside of Catriona.

The feelings coursing through her body were unlike anything she'd ever experienced. Wrapping her arms tightly around Adele, she moulded her own body into Adele's. The sensation of Adele's hand playing up and down her spine created another delightful shock through Catriona's body. Unsure of what she should do, Catriona stroked Adele in the same way.

Adele let out a deep moan and Catriona quickly drew out of the embrace.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know I was hurting you." Catriona's words tumbled from her mouth, and she shyly lifted her eyes to Adele's, smiling face.

"You didn't hurt me. On the contrary, your touch pleased me." Adele's face sobered, replaced by a seriousness Catriona seldom saw. "I know this is new to you, but you must realise I'd never do anything to hurt you." Adele paused, as if searching for words, while not breaking her eyes from Catriona's. "That's why I must ask you something. You must know by now how I feel for you. But do you want this? Think carefully Catriona. What we've done so far is regarded by many as unspeakable, and would cause great pain to both your family and to us if we were found out. Do you understand what I'm asking you?"

"I don't understand. I've never kissed anyone like I've just kissed you and it felt wonderful. What's so unspeakable about what I feel for you?"

"It's wrong in the eyes of society. The way I feel for you, Catriona, is the way a man does about a woman. Love of the same sex is an abomination in the eyes of the church and society. I want to share my love with you, but not unless you want the same. The decision is yours."

Catriona stood at a gateway in her life. To step through would mean a different path. Adele was right. What they had done wasn't socially acceptable, but neither was Catriona with her tomboy ways. It may be wrong, but she'd never felt at such peace with herself and this was something

she liked. She took Adele's hand. "I want you to love me, and I want you to teach me how to love you in return."

Adele's face lit up. She took Catriona's hand and placed a kiss in her palm. She guided her out of the water to where the blanket had earlier been spread and sat, pulling Catriona down beside her. She leant over and loosened the ties on Catriona's chemise.

With tentative hands, Catriona followed Adele's lead.

Adele slid her hands under Catriona's chemise. Her hands cupped Catriona's breasts. "Your skin is so soft," she whispered. Petite and firm, her breasts responded well to Adele's touch. Adele peeled the wet chemise from Catriona's shoulders.

Catriona felt Adele's eyes on her. Suddenly afraid, she panicked and fumbled with Adele's chemise.

Adele gently halted Catriona's hand. "Let me love you first." Leaning over, she placed a tender kiss on Catriona's mouth. She lowered Catriona to the blanket, softly leaving a trail of kisses from Catriona's eyes to her throat.

Catriona had never experienced such sensations. Her breathing was ragged, and she heard the staccato beat of her heart. Yet soon all she could concentrate on were the light kisses Adele tenderly applied to her body.

With Adele's hands cupping her breasts, Catriona feared her heart would burst. Adele's thumbs lightly traced Catriona's nipple as her kisses followed a path down Catriona's throat and across her shoulder. She gasped when Adele lowered her teasing lips to where her hand had been only moments ago. No longer able to contain herself, she grasped the thick tresses of Adele's hair. Adele's tongue played with Catriona's nipple until it blossomed in her mouth.

Adele broke her connection and placed her cheek against Catriona's other breast. "You don't know how long I've waited for this to happen. I've watched you for so long, my love, fearful of what might occur, if you ever discovered my feelings for you."

Catriona stroked Adele's hair. "I never knew, although you made me feel so strange sometimes, when you looked at me like you did. But this, between us now--I can't believe anything which feels so right could be judged so wrong."

"It isn't, if there's love involved."

Adele's tongue flicked Catriona's nipple and Catriona arched against Adele. "Oh Adele," she whispered.

Adele kissed the hollow between Catriona's breasts, unhurriedly moving down till she reached the top of Catriona's bloomers. She slowly peeled the bloomers down and kissed the crown of dark hair.

Catriona shuddered. "Oh God, how do you do that? How do you manage to make me feel this way?"

Adele lightly laughed. "It's love, remember. There's so much more I want to share with you." Reaching down, she placed her hand on top of one of Catriona's legs and, ever so gently, her fingers traced a path to Catriona's inner thigh. She exerted a gentle pressure pulling her leg toward her, in turn revealing Catriona. Bending down, she kissed the soft flesh between Catriona's thighs.

Catriona felt like she was about to explode. It felt like the lower half of her body had physically disassociated from the rest of itself. Adele softly nipped the inside of her legs. Catriona clenched the blanket to stop herself from screaming out Adele's name. Adele's tongue played on a fold of skin no one, except for herself, had ever touched. Adele parted the folds with her tongue, as if she were searching for something special. Catriona moaned. Adele had found the centre of her being.

Letting go of the blanket, Catriona placed her hands on Adele's head and arched her hips toward her mouth. A bright light pierced the inside of her eyelids and time stood still. Then, in an eruption of pleasure, she thrust her hips until she could raise them no more.

Adele moved back up, placing her body next to Catriona's. Leaning across, Adele kissed her on the lips and Catriona tasted what could only be herself. Catriona wrapped her arms and legs around Adele. "I love you. I've never felt like this, and I love you for making me feel this way." Catriona held Adele tightly in her arms. "Please don't ever leave me. I don't know if I could ever love or feel the same way again."

THE ROMANTIC INTERLUDE between the two proved to be memorable yet brief. For six months, both managed to lead the dual lives of governess and student and lovers. Unfortunately, during a period when her father and Alexander were away on business and her mother was supposed to be at afternoon tea, Elizabeth Pelham discovered them. Despite her pleas of love for Adele, her mother gave Adele her notice without reference. Her mother refused to speak to Catriona, instead sending her to her room. On top of Adele's abrupt departure and her exile, her mother had forced Catriona to sit through hour after hour of discussion with Father Cleary. All Catriona knew was that because of the bigotry of her mother, she'd lost the one person she loved. After politely thanking Father Cleary for his words regarding the sanctity of marriage, she told him the same thing she had told her mother. She would never marry merely to satisfy the social requirements of a female living in the Australian countryside.

CATRIONA HAD NEVER again met another lover. Yet she remained resolute. She knew what she wanted. Unfortunately, in a town the size of hers, celibacy wasn't so much a choice as a way of life. Yet, surprisingly, after such a long period of time she'd again found someone. Ironically though, she couldn't have directed her feelings toward a more non-receptive person--a nun.

She thought maybe the best option was to introduce Katherine to one of the town's matriarchs, and see her nicely settled in a well-to-do family.

Catriona shuddered at such an option. She believed Katherine had so much to offer. And her ability to speak her mind--living with those old prunes would see that taken from her. She silently snorted. She'd be nothing more than a confidant to the daughters of landowners and wealthy families. Yet despite Catriona's justification regarding why Katherine should remain at the homestead, the main one was still left unspoken. Catriona had again found someone she liked too much.

Chapter Four

KATHERINE WATCHED THE parties of three and four men move among the rubble where homes and stores once stood. Workmen, already dusty from the day's exertions, divided items into a heap of what could be used again, and put in the back of a cart an ever-increasing pile of what was no longer useful.

"At least the town looks a bit better than what it did yesterday," Katherine said to Catriona.

"It does, but there's so much still to do." Catriona waved to the men who called to her. "I expect it will be a while until some of these people are back on their feet, if at all."

What a strange way for men to greet a woman, Katherine thought. They didn't tip their hats or the use of the word "Miss." Instead, their acknowledgments were like those given to a work partner or an equal.

"It sounds like you're well-known."

Catriona nodded. "Some of the men are part of the farming cooperative. We often share news and crop-raising ideas between us."

"It must be nice to be able to talk with them about things that matter, rather than be constrained by only female social chit chat."

Catriona raised her brows. "I thought you would've preferred such talk."

"I much prefer to talk about substantive issues, rather than vacuous ones."

"Excuse me for a moment." Catriona halted the wagon, to answer a question from one of the workers.

While she spoke with the man, Katherine politely listened, noting that she spoke to the men like no other lady Katherine had ever known. She surreptitiously scanned the woman beside her. Catriona was again dressed in a similar fashion to what she wore yesterday--dusty work boots and long white pants, complemented by a maroon shirt and a broad-brimmed hat.

Catriona and her brother obviously possessed a degree of financial independence, not as great as what Katherine experienced in Ireland, but comfortable just the same. She thought how fortunate for Catriona to be in a position where she didn't have to marry due to fiscal pressures, or to satisfy family. If Katherine had been given the same opportunities, without the pressure of her family, she wondered if she would have joined the convent.

After an abridged trip through town, Catriona again stopped the wagon in front of a store. She hopped off, came around to Katherine's side and stood, poised. With an impertinent grin, she held out her hand. "I know you can get off by yourself. Based on your success last night though, I think it would be better, in the light of day, if I helped you, just in case."

Deciding discretion was the better part of valour, Katherine took the proffered hand. Steadied by Catriona when she alighted, Katherine was surprised at her strength, thinking it must serve her well on the farm.

Catriona reached into the back of the wagon and picked up a mechanical implement. She walked up the stairs of one of the few stores left standing. Reaching the top, she shifted the apparatus to one hip and turned. "I'll be a few minutes. Is there anything you need while we're here?"

Katherine couldn't think of anything. Besides, she didn't have a substantial sum of money. The convent had supplied her with only enough to see her to her destination, assuring her the local parish would then support her. Yet, from what she had seen so far and, with the exception of Catriona's home, it was unlikely the town would be able to provide much support.

Katherine didn't know what she was going to do about that. "N-no, thank you, I have all I need. I'll come in to have a look around if I may."

"Feel free, there's no need to ask. I'm sure the proprietor will be more than happy to see a new face in town."

The shop's interior was markedly darker than outside, and Katherine took a moment to adjust. She cast her eyes around a store that held a bit of everything. There were picks, shovels, and all sorts of weaponry, bolts of cloth, and provisions, to name a few. The store was nothing like the ones she'd frequented back home. She could do a month's shopping in here, without visiting anywhere else. She concluded that the man who owned it must be quite the entrepreneur.

Turning to the counter, Katherine attempted to identify the proprietor and did a double take. Standing among piles of stores and equipment was a short woman with Germanic features. Her blond hair had been pulled into a functional bun, capably suiting Katherine's impression of what a storekeeper should look like. Her dress was a practical one of light blue cotton, covered with a

freshly starched apron for the day's duties. Her round, wire-rimmed glasses served to add to her air as a proprietor. Yet, she had a serene face, which put Katherine at ease.

Catriona placed the metal tool on the counter. "Good Morning, Susan. I'm very relieved to see you fared better than some, with yesterday's storm."

The shopkeeper pointed to the implement occupying the bench top. "Get *that* off my clean counter missy. I've got to lay cloth on this top, and the last thing I want are grease stains caused by the bits and pieces you regularly place on my workspace. The last time you did that it cost me two yards of fine lace. Now put it down on the floor where it belongs."

"Yes, Mrs. Crosier." Catriona touched her hand to her hat, as if mocking Mrs. Crosier. She placed the implement on the floor.

"I'm glad this old shop is made of stone rather than wood," Mrs. Crosier replied as she swept her hand across the counter. "It may be costly to maintain, but it paid for itself yesterday. Unfortunately, my laundry hasn't fared so well. Although, in all honesty, it was only a wood outhouse." She nodded to Katherine. "This must be the new sister. As Catriona's manners have temporarily abandoned her, as they so often do, let me introduce myself." She walked around the counter to Katherine, hand extended. "I'm Susan Crosier. Welcome to Australia."

Katherine shook Susan's firm yet petite hand. "Thank you Mrs. Crosier, I'm Sister Katherine Flynn. Please call me Katherine whenever you deem it appropriate."

"Thank you, and please call me Susan."

Katherine gazed around the store. "Please excuse me for staring, but I'm amazed at the abundance of goods you have in such a confined place."

"There's quite a selection. I expect purchasing goods out here is somewhat different from what you're most likely used to. My store is patronised by people as far as two hundred miles away. They don't always get the opportunity to come in on a weekly basis."

"From that far away--that's almost the size of Ireland, where I've come from."

"That's why some of the families we serve only get into town every six months or so. So it's important they can purchase all their items at once and in the one place." Susan proudly looked at the varied items, uniformly arranged around the walls. "Is there anything you see you'd like to purchase?"

Looking around, Katherine realised how difficult her stay in this country was going to be. There were so many things she needed after her journey. But she absolutely couldn't afford them. Masking the shame of not being able to buy even the most rudimentary item, she walked toward the far corner of the store. "No, thank you. I've more than I require. I'm quite happy to browse if you don't mind." Katherine picked up a hand mirror from one of the shelves. Looking in the

glass, she caught the glance exchanged between Catriona and Susan, and the slight nod of Catriona's head.

"If you're going to stay with me," Catriona said, "I don't intend to be responsible for your dying of heat stroke. By now you must realise, from yesterday's near disaster at the train station, it's extremely important to keep your head covered when you're out in the sun. If you've no objections, I'm going to buy you a hat--as a welcome present." Catriona walked to the hat stand at the corner of the store. "What size are you?"

Hearing the determination in Catriona's voice, Katherine sensed her refusal would only bring about an embarrassing scene. With a sigh, she trudged to where Catriona stood. Katherine's hands consciously reached up to her veil. "I'm not quite sure. It's been a while since I've owned one."

Catriona held out a ladies straw-woven hat. "Try this one on. It has a nice broad brim and should keep the sun off your face."

Placing it on her head, Katherine felt that Catriona had made the perfect choice. Only then did she become aware of the silence in the shop. She turned in time to see Catriona and Susan, who were both in the process of restraining themselves from bursting into laughter. "What's wrong?"

"Have you any idea how silly you look with your veil, wimple *and* a hat on?" Catriona managed to say before breaking into gales of laughter.

Susan's face twitched. "I'm sorry. We're not laughing at you. Your habit, particularly your wimple and veil, is terribly inappropriate for the Australian climate."

Katherine picked up the hand mirror and recognised immediately that she looked ridiculous. She blushed and placed the mirror down. "That settles it. I can't possibly wear a hat with my veil and wimple. Your offer is most generous." She took off the hat and handed it back to Catriona. "However I'm sorry. It's one I can't accept."

"There's another solution, Katherine," Catriona said in clipped tones. "Don't wear such a ridiculous head covering." She thrust the hat back toward her.

"You know that's not possible. This is a part of my habit." Katherine stubbornly handed the hat back to Catriona.

"Now you're being silly," Catriona retorted. "I don't care if your veil and wimple is glued to your head. The simple fact of the matter is if you don't wear a hat you'll suffer under the Australian sun. The sun out here does not differentiate based on religion, *Sister Flynn*."

Catriona stood, hands on hips, challenging Katherine to counter the logic of her argument. Katherine held her ground, hands tightly clasped at her waist, calling on all her willpower to keep her Irish temper in check.

Susan failed to stifle a laugh. "For heaven's sake, look at the two of you. If you stand there much longer one of you are going to burst something." She carefully extricated the now crumpled straw hat from Catriona's hands and poked the other woman in the chest. "You should know better. Katherine's barely been in this country a day and you're already mapping out her life, without first asking. If she doesn't want the hat, then you may buy it, but you can't force her to wear it. And you, Katherine, should step back for a moment. We're not disparaging your religious beliefs. All we're doing is pointing out that maybe your woollen habit needs to be adapted to suit the Australian conditions. If you don't want to wear the hat, then so be it. Either way I won't have you two arguing in the middle of my store." She reshaped the hat and returned it to its original place. "You'll scare away the customers."

Katherine stared at Catriona, aware of the petulance of their situation. Catriona was riveted to her spot, chin slightly forward and eyes afire. It's all right for you, Katherine inwardly huffed. You can afford to buy a hat, and replace it whenever you want. I'd be lucky to even afford the ribbon to go around the hat. Katherine couldn't help but be angered by Catriona. Coupled with this anger was a frustration that Catriona, with her family wealth, could afford to adopt such a position, while she, with hardly any more to her name than a handful of pounds, couldn't.

Catriona broke her gaze. "You're right Susan. I've more important things to do than to stand around and crowd your store. As for Sister Flynn, she has an appointment with the gentlewomen of the town, one which I'm sure she'll enjoy. I'd hate to keep the ladies' committee waiting. Sister Flynn, if you'll follow me."

With a nod toward Susan, Catriona strode out of the store, seemingly oblivious to whether Katherine followed her.

CATRIONA TOOK GREAT delight seeing Katherine struggle with her habit as she got onto the wagon. Allowing Katherine to haul herself up unaided and somewhat unceremoniously was inconsiderate, but she couldn't help herself. She didn't like to be bested by anyone, especially someone new to the town.

"*Thank you* for your help." Katherine looked straight ahead. "I must refine my skills in getting in and out of this wagon." She straightened her tunic. "It's something everyone should learn to do by *themselves*."

Damn it if she doesn't make me feel like a child, Catriona fumed. My actions were petty, but she deserved it. Catriona stopped. She sounded like a bloody spoilt child. Masking her emotions, she cracked the whip a little too liberally beside the horse, to urge it forward. The result was a spooked horse, causing Katherine to hang on.

KATHERINE REMAINED TIGHT-LIPPED during the journey through town, electing to occupy herself with viewing the structures left standing in the main street. The two remaining

buildings were also made of stone. One was a bank--its door blown away by the storm. In the place of what must have been two beautiful arched windows were black holes. The building now resembled a blind man, open-mouthed in shock. The next building, unlike the previous, had bars where windows normally would have been, signalling its use as some form of law enforcement structure.

At the end of the street, Catriona steered the wagon around a group of bedraggled trees. She guided the horse toward a structure which surprisingly hadn't suffered the brunt of the storm. The house was an imposing, garish two-story residence, and looked completely out of place in the Australian countryside. Made mainly of red brick, it possessed an iron lace verandah on both levels. Catriona guided the wagon up the gravelled semicircular driveway, halting at the front entrance.

Katherine had barely pivoted in her seat to get off the wagon when Catriona was on the ground beside her, hand extended. "I don't understand," Katherine quietly said. "You let me struggle at the store, but not *here*?"

"I don't mind some people seeing the more cantankerous side of my nature. But I'll be damned if I'll give a bunch of interfering, beak-nosed old women more fuel for their fire." Catriona motioned with her hand. "Please let me help you down."

She placed her hand into Catriona's gloved one and was gently assisted from the wagon. "Thank you." Katherine's hand lingered in Catriona's. "I expect that's as close to an apology as I'm going to get."

Catriona cleared her throat and removed her hand. "I'll leave you in the hands of the ladies' welcoming committee. There's still a lot of work which needs to be done in town." Catriona consulted her fob watch. "If you don't mind I'll call for you again at, oh, about four-thirty?"

"You mean you're not coming in? Given you and your brother's affluence, I thought you'd be welcomed by such a committee. In fact I'm sure the ladies won't be concerned by you joining them. And, besides, what am I going to talk to them about for such a long time?"

A wry smile tugged at the corners of Catriona's mouth. "I'm sure you'll think of something. As for my staying, to be honest, I wouldn't be caught dead in this viper's nest of gossips. Nor would they welcome my presence. Mind you," she wickedly smiled, "it would be worth it to see the look on their faces. Maybe not on your first visit though. I'm afraid you must go alone. They don't approve of me and I don't approve of their patriarchal attitudes." She placed her timepiece back in her pocket. "We're in Australia, not the mother country, and every person is the same, or at least should be. They should have the right to live their lives as they see fit."

Katherine opened her mouth but then noticed the front door of the house open. The sight of the woman at the top of the stairs was enough for Katherine. "I'm not quite sure what's going on and I'd like some sort of explanation," she whispered. "Now is clearly not the time. I don't like being a pawn in anyone's game and I'd like some answers. And, I don't think four-thirty is such a good

idea. Three-thirty will be a better hour to head for home before it's too dark." Katherine hurried to finish as the woman strode down the stairs to greet her.

"Three-thirty it is then." Catriona pulled herself on to the wagon, not waiting to acknowledge the elderly woman, who was also doing her best to ignore Catriona.

Katherine turned toward the woman.

CATRIONA DIDN'T LOOK back. Her mind lingered on Katherine's actions in the store. Katherine's white knuckles, when she had clutched the hat, belied the obvious control she had over her emotions. Catriona crookedly smiled, admiring Katherine's ability to control her anger, which was something she'd never managed to master. Katherine's control reminded Catriona of a mid-twenties version of her first tutor. With the exception of her deep green eyes, Katherine's emotions couldn't be read, something Catriona found frustrating. She shook her head and negotiated the horse and wagon around the corner, and out of sight of the house.

"HOW DO YOU do, Sister? My name is Mrs. Muriel Greystone. Welcome to our quaint part of Australia. Please come inside out of the sun and meet the other ladies. It's far too hot for a lady of *your* breeding to stand too long in such heat." Not waiting for a response, Mrs. Greystone placed her hand under Katherine's elbow and guided her toward the home.

The house was the first ostentatious demonstration of wealth Katherine had experienced since arriving. Despite this, she couldn't help but think it looked out of place in this town. They paused at the foot of the stairs as Mrs. Greystone abruptly instructed a man, who could only have been the gardener, on what flowers she wanted in the epergne at the evening's dinner table.

Momentarily left to her own thoughts, Katherine reflected back on Catriona's actions when they arrived. She was relieved that Catriona had reverted to calling her by her first name, but she wondered why this committee didn't approve of her. She was obviously well respected by the people they had met in town and those she worked with yesterday.

Katherine was ushered into a sizeable entrance hall where another five similarly-dressed women waited. She felt like she'd walked into a setting where time had stopped, along with the reality of the outside world. The tight-laced, narrow-waisted outfits of the women were clearly inappropriate for such hot weather. The ladies were adorned in fashions which were out of style even *before* Katherine had entered the convent. Yet, strangely enough, what they were wearing suited them. She nodded politely during her introduction to each of the ladies. After this, she was marshalled into the parlour, where tea and cake awaited them.

The ladies were polite, if not overly so, while they probed for news of "The Old Country". They were keenly interested in the current fashions, of which Katherine couldn't be of any great help.

She provided them with as much information as she could, excusing her lack of up-to-date knowledge due to her calling, where fashion wasn't at the forefront of her daily life.

Katherine was relieved when the conversation steered toward topics she was able to discuss. She happily answered questions regarding her trip to Australia, the weather, and how Sydney was faring.

"I must profess," one of the ladies said as she dabbed her mouth with a white napkin, "I haven't travelled to Sydney in such a long time. In fact I think the last time I visited was for my coming out."

Katherine politely nodded. That must have been a very long time ago.

One of the ladies patted Katherine's knee. "I'm so sorry we couldn't properly meet you yesterday, my dear. We had planned such a lovely reception. With that ugly storm, well..."

Katherine dismissively waved her hand. "I completely understand. You must have been terrified." She stifled a laugh at the nodding heads and widened eyes.

Mrs. Monteith reached forward with her gnarled hand and grasped another slice of cake. "So, where are you currently residing?"

Katherine smiled at this social game. She hadn't played it since entering the convent. They'd seen Catriona drop her off. It was only reasonable to conclude that she was staying with her. "I am currently staying at the Pelham estate." She tried to make Catriona's house sound somewhat grand.

Mrs. Greystone patronisingly patted her hand. "It's merely a property, my dear. We very rarely regard all but the most affluent of homes on the land as anything more than a property. Never mind. How could you have known what we call it here? Do you intend to move into town once it's regained some semblance of order?" Mrs. Greystone gestured to the gathering. "I'm sure one of our ladies would be honoured to accommodate you."

Katherine was stuck in a situation she didn't care to be in. If she said yes, then she wouldn't be able to help those she'd come all this way for. And what would Catriona think? She offered her home without a second thought. Katherine hadn't seen any of *these* ladies yesterday making a similar offer. It would be terribly impolite to move into town. Yet how could she say no without causing offense? She hit upon a solution and her face brightened.

"Thank you for your most gracious offer. However, I believe it is more prudent for me to stay where I am. I am most aggrieved by the loss of Sister Coreen. And there are a number of her papers and personal items out at the property which must be sorted through, prior to them being returned to her family in Ireland. As a fellow sister, I feel I should be the one to do this. So, at least until the return of Father Cleary, I believe it best that I reside out there." That wasn't that far from the truth. There *were* personal items of Coreen's, as well as letters which needed to be

written to her family and to the Mother Superior in Ireland. By the looks on their faces though, she deduced it wasn't what these ladies wanted to hear.

The room suddenly fell silent. The women seated around her exchanged worried glances between them. Why were they so keen for her to leave Catriona? Katherine sensed asking such a question wasn't a good idea and, in turn, elected to remain silent.

"It's very touching that you place your responsibilities of caring for your fellow sister's meagre belongings to the forefront. Such a move is most Christian," said Mrs. Cross. "Unfortunately the environment at the property is far from one of a Christian household. My dear, I feel it is our responsibility to advise you the young Mr. Pelham is currently seeking a father for the purposes of performing marriage vows for him and Sister Coreen. He's obviously not yet aware of her passing."

"I appreciate your concern and honesty. Miss Pelham has advised me of the situation between Mr. Pelham and Sister Coreen." Katherine sensed the formal use of Catriona's name was more appropriate for this gathering. "You must understand this makes it even more important that I should be the one to see to her papers and belongings. Can you imagine the shock for her family, or the Mother Superior, in finding something which could only bring heartache to those back home?"

"Sister," Mrs. Cross replied, "I believe the situation between Sister Coreen and Mr. Pelham is the least of your troubles. I feel you may be badly influenced by Miss Pelham."

Finally Catriona had been directly referred to by the gathering. Katherine was puzzled by what sort of influence Catriona might possess. Despite her curiosity, she decided to play dumb, which wasn't hard, particularly given she had no idea what they were talking about. Looking at Mrs. Greystone, she tried to put on the best confused look she could muster.

"Er, as you can see she dresses very differently and entirely inappropriately for a woman with the assets she and her brother possess," Mrs. Greystone said, her wrinkled face flushed. "She's too old to be wearing the clothes of a tomboy. It's time she was married and starting her own family."

So she doesn't fit the mould of what you all demand of a woman. Katherine admired Catriona for her refusal to surrender to the yoke of convention. She wished she could do the same. Sensing tact was again called for, she carefully replied, "Do not overly concern yourself about her influence on my dress as I already have my habit. My calling does not allow me to wear trousers. As for her unmarried state, I expect she has had plenty of suitors and is yet to find one she wishes to spend the rest of her life with. I am sure you would all agree such a choice should not be made lightly."

"You see that's just it," Mrs. Cross interjected. "She has never had a suitor. She prefers to seek out the company of males to discuss the cost of wheat, or compare the latest new machinery. Her actions are *entirely* inappropriate for a woman of her upbringing. Her mother would roll in her grave..." She suddenly stopped, and raised her teacup to her lips.

"Ladies, I thank you for your concern." Katherine attempted to look pious as possible. "However I feel it is most un-Christian-like to speak about someone who is not here to appropriately respond to your queries. If I feel my presence is not suited to the Pelham property, then I will reconsider your magnanimous offer." Despite her efforts to make it clear as politely possible the subject was now closed, it didn't assuage the number of questions Katherine had. Just how old was Catriona, and how had she managed to escape marrying anyone? These were questions only Catriona could answer. But how could Katherine broach them?

The remainder of the afternoon passed uneventfully, with Katherine's energy and patience flagging as the soiree drew to a close. Thankfully, at precisely three-thirty a servant quietly announced the arrival of Miss Pelham. Having said her goodbyes, Katherine was again escorted outside by Mrs. Greystone. Here the same ritual was played out as had occurred earlier, with no words being passed between the three of them.

CATRIONA SAID NOTHING until the wagon was well out of earshot. She had known what the soiree would hold for Katherine. She'd be bled dry on subjects she knew barely anything about from a group of women who were living out a fantasy. They would casually banter, have lunch, and then the inevitable question would come. Catriona had steeled herself for Katherine's imminent departure. Perhaps it was for the best, she thought. Living on a property remote from the rest of population and prey to bushrangers isn't the lifestyle for a sister, and neither was being badgered by a cantankerous Pelham.

Unable to wait any longer, she adopted what she hoped was a casual tone, "So, whose residence will you be living in during your stay here?"

"I think you already know the answer to that. I could no sooner see myself living in the household of *any* of those ladies than I could see myself living in the original sister's accommodation you showed me last night. But if I'm to stay with you and your brother, I need to know what's going on." Katherine turned and faced Catriona. "I don't know what one has done to the other, but you and Mrs. Greystone, and the rest of the ladies' committee for that matter, are rather cool toward each other."

"I'll tell you when we get home." Catriona remained calm, but inside, she was elated. She'd felt sure her over-reaction that morning would have resulted in Katherine being more than willing to pack her belongings and move into town. How had she managed to do it? Those women, whom she thought of as bloody cattle ticks, could be very convincing when they wanted to be. Catriona would bet money that they'd badgered her non stop on why she wasn't married. But how could Catriona explain *that* to her?

PULLING THROUGH THE gate to the property, Katherine had her first real glance of the Gleneagle homestead. That morning she'd been too engrossed in preparing herself for her wagon

lesson and her trip into town to take much notice. To the front of her were two main buildings and a selection of lesser-sized huts.

"Your house is lovely."

"Thank you."

Katherine pointed. "What are those buildings there?"

Catriona motioned with her head. "The one with the window, closest to the house, is a laundry. The other without the windows, with a conical roof is our smokehouse or curing shed. Unfortunately it's one of the only ways we can manage keep meat from going off in this climate. And that final structure is obviously the barn."

"Your home fits in so much better than Mrs. Greystone's residence. Hers looks more like a city house than one suitable for the country."

Catriona shrugged. "There's no accounting for taste." She brought the wagon to a halt. "I'll help you off here if you like."

Katherine took Catriona's hand. "Would you like a hand unharnessing the horse? If I'm to use the wagon then shouldn't I learn what to do?"

"I'm fine. There'll be time tomorrow for your next lesson. Why don't you head on inside?"

Catriona continued toward the barn and Katherine turned to face the house in front of her. The sun's rays reflected off the cream sandstone brick of the home, casting long shadows on the verandah which, in turn, afforded shade from the heat of the afternoon's sun. The main entry was flanked by full-length, green louvered French windows, and these continued around the house at regular intervals. The roof, which extended out from the house to meet the edge of the verandah, was covered in corrugated iron sheeting. "Yes," she nodded. "It fits perfectly in this setting."

OVER A CUP of tea, Catriona listened while Katherine regaled her with her tales of her escape from the town's matriarchs. "I'm impressed. I wish I was as quick-witted as you. Sometimes I think I rely too much on my harsh tongue to resolve a situation."

"You don't say? Maybe that's what the matriarchs are afraid of," Katherine soberly replied, and her face broke into a grin. "Seriously though, what's happened between you and them? They're terribly worried by your potential influence on me. And they seem obsessed with getting you into a dress."

"As I mentioned there are currently no workers on the farm, leaving myself and Alexander to manage the property except during harvest-time and mustering," Catriona carefully explained, her tone non-committal. "He's often away on business, and this leaves me responsible for the

farm's day-to-day management. It wouldn't be right for me to sit here in a dress all day and employ a man on work I can easily do. What I can't accomplish waits until Alexander's return, or I ask one of the men in town to help me."

"They're also incredibly focused on getting you married." Katherine took a sip from her tea. "They were most concerned by your lack of suitors."

Catriona nearly choked on her biscuit. She'd expected such a question, but hadn't anticipated it being posed so bluntly. She'd expected an obscure reference to her age and the number of suitors seeking her hand. She reached for her tea, under the pretence of washing down the remains of her biscuit from a throat suddenly bereft of all moisture. Placing her cup down, she chose her words carefully.

"I'm twenty-eight, and I know by now I should've found someone to share the rest of my life with. In fact, a long while ago I thought I had. I was seventeen and my mother felt the age difference between my suitor and myself was--er, too great, so she forbade the relationship. Since then I haven't found any one else who I feel strong enough to commit my life to. And, at this point in time, I'm comfortable with where I am, and what I have."

Catriona was pleased with her answer, feeling it to be as truthful as she chose to be at this moment. Given the chance, Catriona would have been more than content to spend the rest of her life with Adele. If only her mother hadn't interfered. Now, thank God, there was no one to interfere. Even Alexander had given up raising the matter with her. Catriona's life was hers to do with as she pleased. She looked up to see Katherine gazing intently at her.

"I understand completely."

Catriona was incredulous. "You do?" She barely stopped herself from spilling the remaining contents of her cup on the table.

"I was also in a similar situation. My family was forcing me into marriage based on my age. I was twenty-two at the time. Unfortunately, or fortunately, as fate would have it, I was left at the altar by my husband-to-be. He eloped with a younger girl who possessed a significantly larger dowry than mine. I admittedly had no want to marry and discovered the solace I sought through taking my vows. This saved me from further marriage suitors, which my mother would have undoubtedly pursued for me, as well as providing me inner peace and comfort."

Catriona masked her feelings, inwardly cursing herself to think they shared the same reason for an unwillingness to marry. She was taken by Katherine's story all the same. Joining a convent would be one way to avoid an unhappy marriage, but the celibacy issue was something Catriona couldn't reconcile to, despite the fact she'd been emotionally celibate for the last eleven years. It had been so long, she'd almost forgotten how it felt to love another woman, and that was something not likely to be resolved in the near future.

"You've nothing to fear from my influence. The women in town find my values unpalatable because I won't allow myself to be compartmentalised like them. Ignorance will always breed

fear, and I think their fear masks a dislike of anything different." Catriona cleared the table. "Enough said. There are chores to do in the yard. I'd be grateful if you helped me."

Katherine rose. "I'd be happy to."

"Thank you." Catriona reached for her hat. "After that I think you'll have well and truly earned your supper." She motioned Katherine into the yard and the fading light of an orange-red sunset.

Chapter Five

KATHERINE LEANT BACK from her kneeling position, onto her heels, and wiped the tip of her nose. She would have never guessed, since her arrival, that she'd still need to clean the parlour's fireplace. Yet despite the passage of time and the advent of warmer days, the evening temperatures were still sufficiently low to warrant the occasional fire. She looked up when the parlour door opened.

Catriona placed two glasses of water on one of the occasional tables in the room and laughed. "Have you been cleaning the fire or communing with it?"

Katherine looked at her soot-marked hands. She stood and gazed at the mirror to the left of the mantelpiece. Pulling a handkerchief from her belt, she wet it with the tip of her tongue and wiped her nose free of the ashes in temporary residence there. "I never was a *clean* cleaner, if you know what I mean. Somehow I always manage to transfer the dirt from where it is and on to me." She picked up the glass of water and took a sip. "Thank you. I think I have as much soot down my throat as on my hands."

Catriona sat. "Don't worry. You haven't yet seen me clean a fireplace. Let me tell you, it's not very pretty."

The two shared a laugh and Katherine sat next to her. "I can't believe how time has flown. It feels like only yesterday I was getting off the train."

"Time does that out here," Catriona said. "Is it what you expected?"

Katherine tilted her head. "In all honesty, I'm not sure I knew *what* I was getting myself in for. I thought the majority of my time would be spent with my religious calling. Instead, it plays an equal role with my work with the children. Although I must admit I was surprised, when I visited the outlying farms, to find not all of families attended regular Sunday services."

"Most of them are God-fearing folk. But, when you work from dawn to dusk, and the only day you have off is Sunday, sometimes it's nice to spend it at home, resting for the week ahead." She tapped Katherine's sleeve. "I did tell you things were a bit different out here."

"That you did. I'm glad they do spend some time reading passages on a Sunday, even if it is at home."

"I was at the co-op the other day, and you were being talked about in very glowing terms. Apparently you treated a bad cut on one of the Connor children."

Katherine shrugged. "Thankfully I was taught the rudimentary elements of first aid by the sisters, prior to me leaving Ireland. My being there to treat the cut was sheer luck. I just happened to be giving lessons to the Connor children."

"Your teaching was also mentioned. You've gained a good reputation with the less fortunate families of the district. The other day I heard Mrs. Daniel say she'd never seen her son Tom sit and listen for so long."

Katherine smiled. "I enjoy teaching the children very much, especially given there's no local school for them to attend. I have to say, I'm disappointed there's no library in the district. With the exception of your books, and some of Susan's, I'm running out of appropriate reading material for the children."

Catriona sipped her water. "Didn't you write to the convent about getting some children's books, as well as placing an order with Susan for some books from Sydney?"

"Yes, and it took half of my money to do so. It'll be worth it though, if just to see the look on their faces. In fact, I'm heading to the Daniel place this morning, and I thought I'd pay a quick visit to Susan. Is there anything you need?"

Catriona looked at Katherine, her glass midway between the table and her lips. "I, er don't think so." She rose. "Tell Susan I said hello."

Katherine frowned when Catriona left the room. Sometimes she thought her enigmatic housemate meant to say something more, but then she didn't. She finished her water, picked up the dust pan and hand brush, and returned to the task at hand.

DRIVING THE WAGON through town, Katherine was relieved to see that, at last, the town was beginning to regain its semblance of normality. People still mourned the loss of friends and family, but this was to be expected. She wished the father would return, if for no other reason than to properly bless the dead. She pulled the wagon to the front of Susan's store and applied the brake, then headed up the stairs. She stood to one side while a group of people left the store, goods in hand.

Walking in, Katherine glanced at the customers Susan was serving. She searched her memory for their names, knowing them to be the family of one of the less fortunate farmers. Mrs. McCallen. And her young daughter Eliza, from the west side of town. Susan passed sacks of flour, sugar, and beans to the woman, and yet no money exchanged hands. After a courteous nod to Mrs McCallen, Katherine quickly retired to the far end of the store, to afford mother and daughter some privacy.

"Good morning Katherine," Susan said as the door closed behind a departing Mr McCallen. "How are you?"

Katherine put down the dainty handkerchief she'd been admiring. "I'm fine, thank you. Your shop certainly is a thriving business. I was nearly knocked down by the rush of people as I was coming in."

"As the town's people get back on their feet, they need to restock and refurnish their homes." Susan wiped a trace of flour from her counter. "It's been a very busy few weeks." She walked around the counter and picked up the handkerchief Katherine was admiring. "You've impeccable taste. This fringe is imported French lace."

"It's lovely."

Susan held it out. "Would you like it?"

A handkerchief as fine as that would about take the remainder of her funds. Katherine held up her hand. "No thank you. The ones I have are fine."

"Please take it, as a present from me to you, and from the families you've done so much for since you arrived. Besides, everyone deserves to be spoilt every now and then."

Despite the benevolence of Susan's gesture, Katherine was frustrated at her inability to purchase the item outright. Not reaching for the handkerchief, she attempted to redirect the conversation.

"I don't mean to sound forward, but why are you so reluctant to accept my money? After all, I *was* supplied with funds by the convent. In fact, I saw you do the same thing with Mrs. McCallen a moment ago. You wouldn't take her money either."

Susan placed the handkerchief back on the shelf. "Out here, payment on receipt of goods isn't the only way I do business. Most of my customers must await the outcome of the sale of their crops or cattle before settling their annual accounts. And besides," Susan winked, "I've always had a terrible time keeping my books. When settlement time comes around, the families always seem to be able to pay me in full and yet have money left over for the nicer things in life."

"How do you run a successful business like that? Surely this must leave you in poverty for the better part of the year. How do you manage to pay your creditors?"

Susan lightly patted Katherine's cheek. "I like you. You remind me a lot of Sister Coreen. She was always asking questions, never quite realising what was impolite to ask." Susan sobered. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring her up."

Katherine smiled sadly. "It's all right. I believe people should remember her for who she was. As for me, the nuns were forever cautioning me against my outspokenness. In fact, it's a good thing I'm a nun. I don't expect any husband would endure my incessant questions. I'm sorry to be so intrusive."

"I don't mind. Women should be able to ask questions. There are three ways I manage to stay out of the poor house. The first and more widely used means is through a system of barter. I do this with families who wish to purchase something in exchange for items such as eggs, milk, and sometimes cured or fresh meat from an animal they've recently slaughtered. I then deduct what we both agree is a reasonable sum from their final account. This, in turn, reduces my living costs. The second way is I treat the hard-working families differently, as you've just seen. They give me what they can, when they can. As for the well-established landowners who refuse to raise a finger for those who struggle to make a living, that's a different kettle of fish." Susan's eyes glinted with barely concealed anger. "As far as I'm concerned, for them there's only one mode of payment----on demand."

"If only more people were as benevolent as you, particularly those who seem to have a wealth of riches and yet are still reluctant to use it on anyone but themselves."

"Speaking of money, you may be surprised to know, even before I bought this store, I was a woman of independent means." She chuckled. "Close your mouth Katherine, or you'll catch flies. I don't have a husband, but this wasn't always so. I was once married to a man who loved money more than anything. We arrived in Sydney when I was barely twenty and he immediately set about making money in any scheme that was profitable. His real luck came when gold was discovered in Sofala. He wasn't lured, like so many were, by the promise of gold. He gained his fortune by selling pieces of equipment needed by the miners to find the precious metal. He sold these tools at exorbitant prices and, like most men, his greed consumed him. One day he pushed his luck too far and was killed by a digger down on his luck and desperate for just a respite from his lot in life. Unfortunately the miner got neither, ending his life at the end of a rope. I took the strongbox, which was rightfully mine, sold the store and provisions to another man, and left. Rather than return to Sydney, which I detested, I opted for a burgeoning country town, comfortable in the financial knowledge I'd never have to marry again."

"You don't want to remarry?" Katherine looked at Susan. Her complexion had not yet been ravaged by the harsh climate, like she'd seen with so many other women in the town. "You're still a relatively young woman. I'm sure there'd be many gentlemen in the district more than happy to marry you."

Susan smiled and furtively glanced at the stairs leading to the second level of her store. "I've had a number of offers, but the memories of my marriage aren't happy ones. My husband wasn't a kindly man. He found no wrong in hitting a woman. Nor was he content with the love of one. He was a regular in the local watering hole, or as you would call it a tavern, and a favourite of the

professional women who worked there. I'm not saying all men are cut from the same cloth, but my life now has different priorities. Finding another husband is not one of them."

"I'm continually surprised by the women of this town. Catriona's so strong and confident with the men she deals with, and you're self-sufficient."

Susan again picked up the handkerchief and placed it in Katherine's hand. "I'm self-sufficient enough to offer a gift to a friend. And, while we're talking about my financial independence..." Susan opened her strong box, took out a note, and placed it in Katherine's hand, closing Katherine's fingers over them. "Here's half the cost of the books you've ordered from Sydney."

Katherine's eyes widened. "You can't do that."

"Of course I can, and I won't accept the money back." Susan lowered her voice, when another customer entered the store. "If the funds given to Sister Coreen by the convent were anything to go by, then I'm more than aware how much money you were given."

"Thank you," Katherine replied, fighting back tears. "I won't forget this."

IN THE COOL of the evening, as they sat on the verandah, Katherine relayed the events at the store to Catriona. "I didn't realise Susan was so financially independent."

Catriona trimmed the lantern between the two of them, in an attempt to reduce the number of insects drawn to the lantern's flame. "She is. Some days I think it's only been her generosity which has saved a lot of poorer families from going bust."

Katherine snickered. "With the questions I was asking, I was beginning to sound like one of the members of the ladies' committee."

"Speaking of which, you're doing a commendable job of steering clear of them." Catriona leant back in her chair and crossed her ankles. "If I recall, last week was only the third time you hadn't managed to wrangle your way out of their clutches."

"I very much prefer administering to the hardworking families of the district. Between the ladies' committee's incessant questions about you, whether I would prefer to live in town, and my need to maintain polite, flippant, vacuous conversation, well, the visits leave me drained." Katherine sighed. "Although, as a nun, I do understand I still need to be courteous to them. I wish it wasn't so hard." Katherine lightly slapped Catriona.

"What was that for?"

"You're not much help. You take a perverse delight in seeing the look on their faces when you drop me off at their homes. I swear, the other day when you accompanied me *astride* your horse, I thought Mrs. Simpson was going to have a conniption."

Catriona softly laughed. "It keeps me from falling off my horse."

"Of course it does," Katherine scoffed. "It has nothing to do with you upsetting them. I just wish they were more sympathetic to those less fortunate."

For a while they sat in silence, listening to the sound of the wind as it whistled through the trees.

"Do you ever wonder whether you made the right decision?" Catriona asked.

Katherine crinkled her brows. "What, visiting the ladies' committee?"

"No, becoming a nun. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

Katherine lightly patted Catriona's hand. "Given some of the probing questions I ask you, I think it's only fair I answer yours." She took a breath and slowly exhaled. "When I see families who, despite their struggles, are so happy, I wonder what it would be like to be married, with children and a house to live in."

"I expect you could have easily had that in Ireland."

"Yes, I could have." Katherine stopped at the sound of a bird echoing in the trees overhead. "But look what I would have missed. The raucous noise from the white sulphur-crested cockatoos landing in the tree outside my window every morning, turning it from green to snowy white. The shrill laughter of that cheeky kookaburra when I hang out the washing. I swear he's sharing a secret joke with the other kookaburras. And the colours out here, they're so different from Ireland. There are so many shades of green, not to mention the skies at dusk and the stars. This country is full of splendour, yet harsh at the same time."

Catriona looked up at the night sky. "It's beautiful in its own way."

Katherine pointed to a constellation. "That's the Southern Cross, isn't it?"

Catriona followed Katherine's hand. "Yes, it is."

"It reminds me of a kite, with its tail blowing in the wind. I loved kites when I was a child, but my father was continually frustrated when I would let them go."

Catriona scratched her head. "I don't think I've ever seen a kite."

"I'll make you one if you like. Look, two shooting stars parallel to each other." Katherine fell silent.

Catriona snorted. "I don't believe what I just saw, sister. Correct me if you dare, but I'm sure I saw you close your eyes at the passing of those shooting stars. Perchance you weren't indulging in the pagan act of making a wish, were you?"

Katherine laughed at Catriona's mock severity. "Indeed I was, Miss Pelham. As one of many of God's spectacles I was thanking Him for the opportunity to view such a rare event." She faced Catriona, trying to mask her embarrassment at being caught. How could she admit that her wish involved the hope that the ladies' committee would soon tire of asking her to move in to town, when she so very much loved where she was, being here with someone she could easily relate to? In an attempt to deflect Catriona's question, Katherine decided the best form of defence was attack.

"And are you telling me you would let such an opportunity go unnoticed to make a wish?"

"I never let an opportunity go unnoticed if the time is right," Catriona said quietly.

For a moment neither spoke as they looked at each other. Catriona ran her hands through her hair and eased herself out of her chair. She threw the remains of her tea into the inky black of the night. "If you'll excuse me, I'm off to bed. I have to check fences in the top paddock tomorrow, as well as go into town."

"I haven't yet seen all of the property, and I've not got any commitments tomorrow. May I come along? I can help you with whatever it may be, even if it means only holding a hammer. Besides, how can you do all this by yourself?"

"I'd be happy for your company, but we won't be alone. Mr. Connor and his sons from the adjacent farm will be helping me. The fence stops their cattle from straying onto Gleneagle and ruining my crops. I pay them for the work. I'd be happy if you didn't mention that the job could as easily be done by two than by six, for all the sons will be there with their father tomorrow. I'm sure they're also aware of this, but they're not so foolish as to refuse money they sorely need. It's a private game between us. They'll provide lunch. It's the way their family showcases their skills. Their mother is one of the better pastry cooks in the district." Catriona picked up the lamp.

Katherine followed her through the door and into a well-lit kitchen. "I remember now. Four sons, two daughters, and another baby on the way. I can't fathom how they manage, but it's understandable when they've a neighbour like you." Katherine was well aware that behind a brash exterior was a woman who had a true affinity with the people out here, with the exception of a minor affluent few. Maybe that's why the men treated her with such respect.

Catriona's face reddened. "It's something any good neighbour would do for another," she brusquely replied. "And, besides it's a reciprocal arrangement."

Catriona trimmed the wick on the old, utilitarian lamp they'd used outside and picked up the inside lamp from the kitchen table. "I'll take you to your room and light your lamp for you if you want. You best be getting some sleep. It'll be a long day tomorrow." She walked through the house with Katherine in tow.

Katherine hurriedly dressed into her threadbare shift. She was glad the garment was so light, for at the moment most of the nights were so balmy. As she prepared for bed, she couldn't help but think about Catriona, who tried so hard to hide the good she did for others. That was not the only

thing she concealed though. She was also very good at disguising her emotions, which Katherine thought was a defence mechanism she'd used since losing her parents. Katherine drew her curtains. Pulling down the covers, she hoped a time would come when she could repay the kindness she'd been shown. Climbing into bed she quickly fell asleep, her dreams full of shooting stars and town matriarchs hot in the pursuit of a laughing Catriona, who remained tantalisingly out of their gnarled grasps.

KATHERINE'S DOOR CLOSED and Catriona headed for the sanctuary of her own room. She sat on her bed and undressed. "Damn that was close," She muttered. She knew she needed to be more careful with what she said to Katherine, particularly when she sat so near. Such comments, if interpreted correctly by Katherine, could force her into the town, where those old matriarchs wanted her.

They'd established such a good friendship which wasn't likely to continue if Catriona scared her away with either words or actions that could never be reciprocated. Catriona shed the remainder of her clothes and got into bed, relieved that Katherine hadn't pushed her about any wishes she would have made on the shooting stars. After all, how could she explain that her wish involved wanting to get closer to her?

KATHERINE AWOKE THE next day to a knock on her door and the sound of footsteps continuing down the hallway. In the muted grey of dawn she lit her lamp, read her morning passage, then quickly dressed and headed for the kitchen. She looked at the clock above the stove.

"I know you said early, but I didn't expect it to be *this* early."

"Good morning." Catriona placed a plate of bacon and eggs and a cup of hot tea on the table and motioned Katherine to take a seat. "It's better if we travel now, that way we can make best use of the daylight hours."

In short time their breakfast was finished and the dishes washed.

Catriona checked the stove and then straightened. "Do you need anything else from your room?"

"I don't think so."

Catriona tossed a water bladder over her shoulder and picked up her hat from the table. "We better get going then." She looked down at a ladies' broad-brimmed hat which sat at the end of the table. "Are you *sure* you don't need anything else?"

Katherine rolled her eyes. "I've said it once, but I'll say it again, in case the sun has addled your brain. I'm not wearing a hat over my wimple and veil."

"Suit yourself, but don't come crying to me when, in a few years time, your beauty is all but gone."

Without waiting for an answer, Catriona walked out the door.

Katherine self-consciously brought her hand to her face. Did she say I was beautiful? Her eyes narrowed and she shook a finger at the back door. "You can't fool me. That was no more than another one of your tricks to get me to wear that hat. I won't be fooled that easily." Walking past the headgear, she headed toward the barn.

KATHERINE ONCE AGAIN shifted in her seat.

Catriona looked sideways at her. "I told you in the barn that the journey would take two hours."

"Yes, you did," Katherine grumbled. "And next time I'll accept your offer of a cushion. By the way, when I was in town the other day, I overheard the constable discussing the local bushrangers." Despite the danger, Katherine couldn't control her excitement at the thought of such desperados.

"They're ranging around the district again. The constable's upset because they're too smart for him to catch them. I've no doubt it's because they're being protected by the poorer families of the district. The bushrangers never rob from these families. They only target the richer graziers. With tactics like that I doubt they'll ever be caught."

"Have they robbed you?"

"No, but that doesn't mean they're not dangerous. For the immediate future it might be best, when you have to leave the house, for you to leave me a note, so I know who you're visiting."

"Of course." As they topped the rise of a hill, Katherine saw, in the very far distance, a group of trees which couldn't readily be called a copse, yet were a strange presence in such a landscape. Katherine pointed. "What's over there? Is it still part of the property?"

Catriona stared straight ahead. "It's still part of the property, but it's nothing now but a dried, weed-choked spring. I don't think it's properly flowed for years."

"You're not even looking. How did you know what I'm pointing at?"

"There's not too much of this property that I don't know like the back of my hand."

Catriona's clipped tones were lost on Katherine. "How do you know it's dry?" she enthusiastically asked. "If it's not, it might be a wonderful place for a picnic, wouldn't it?"

"It's not nice and it's most likely overgrown, and full of snakes. Besides, I've hardly the time for picnics. And I don't want you going there by yourself. If you hurt yourself you mightn't be found for days."

Catriona whipped the horse into a faster pace, making it difficult for Katherine to look behind her at the trees and hold on at the same time. She thought that there was obviously more to the spring than what Catriona was telling her. Rather than commence their day on a sour note, Katherine let the matter rest. There'd be plenty of time to ask again, when her companion wasn't in such a prickly mood. She attempted to steer the conversation onto safer ground, "You mentioned you had cattle on your property?"

Catriona's features slightly relaxed. "We run a herd of beef cattle in the top paddock. At last count I think it was only fifty head, nothing too substantial. They're currently in the paddock close to a gate connecting this property to the Connor property."

Katherine frowned. "Why do you need a gate between the two farms?"

"This enables a business arrangement between us, regarding the free agistment of Connor and Gleneagle cattle. We switch between properties, allowing the herds to graze on the other property when the grass gets too low on one."

"I didn't think the Connor selection was that big." Suddenly the pieces came together. "You do this for them, don't you?" Catriona shyly smiled and pretended to occupy herself with the handling of the wagon and horse. "Why are you so uncomfortable about people knowing how much you help others?"

Catriona shifted in her seat. "The less people know about it the better. I trust you not to say anything to them. I'm sure if the arrangement was actually mentioned to Mr. Connor then he would insist on paying me for his agistment on my property. And besides, in times like this when Alexander's away, it does help to have another pair of eyes on the cattle."

Katherine nudged Catriona. "You can't fool me, you're overly generous." Catriona merely grunted and urged the horse forward.

SIX PAIRS OF hands made quick work of the fence repairs. Katherine was spellbound by the process used by the team. Some of the group barked the trees, while others split the logs, and Catriona prepared the hole for the posts to go into. When finished, they placed a wood structure on both sides. Roughly hewn, it looked like a stepladder erected on both sides of the fence to stop clothing being torn when climbing through barbed wire.

Katherine handed a water bag to Catriona. "Why don't you cut the trees down when you arrive, rather than leave them on the ground?"

Catriona took a swig from the bag. She then soaked her handkerchief and wiped her face. "The trees must cure first." She offered the water bag to Mr. Connor, who gratefully accepted it. "Otherwise we'll be left with warped posts, and a warped fence line."

"What's that for?" Katherine asked.

Catriona wiped her hands on the seat of her trousers. "It's a step-over system used around this area. It eliminates the need to travel the extra distance by road."

"Such a simple invention and yet so versatile," Katherine said.

The group shared a laugh, most likely at her incessant questions. One of the men slapped Catriona on the back as they gathered the tools together. Katherine was again amazed by how well she worked with the men. Catriona clearly didn't possess their strength but she still managed to hold her own. She laboured with gracefulness and a surety of purpose that Katherine had never seen in other women. She reminisced on the moment, during the morning, when Catriona's axe swing missed its intended target. Catriona casually laughed with the rest of the men, about her poor aim. When she laughed her face altogether changed, and her eyes took on a completely different light. She had such a natural beauty. Katherine felt it such a shame that she chose to live her life without someone close to share it. Bringing herself back into the present Katherine decided to occupy herself in a more practical manner.

Rather than waste the time of one of the men, she set out the lunch, which was more than an adequate fare for the seven of them. Catriona was right. Mrs. Connor had prepared a number of sweet and savoury pastries which were easy to eat on the run. With the tea Mrs. Connor had also provided, it reminded Katherine of the ploughman's lunches she'd often eaten in Ireland.

Unlike Ireland in late October, the sun was hot, and her woollen habit wasn't helping matters. She placed the back of her hand to her face and felt even more heat, only imagining what her face would look like by the time she got home. Maybe I should swallow my pride and wear that hat after all, she concluded. When the men and Catriona finished their work, she motioned them over for their meal.

MR. CONNOR WIPED his hands together. "That was lovely, even if I do say so meself."

Katherine placed the remainder of the lunch into a wooden box the Connors' had brought it in. "And all thanks to your wife. How is she faring?"

"After six children she's well and truly got this child bearing thing down pat. She's fine or at least she looks like she is."

"If you don't mind I might pay her a visit, to see how things are going," Katherine said.

Mr. Connor stood, his sons following their father's action. "I don't mind at all Sister Katherine, and I'm sure the missus will be happy for a break from the young-uns." He held his hand out to Catriona and she took it. "Thanks again, Catriona. Let me know when you want a hand moving your cattle. I'll send one of the boys down."

"Not a problem." Catriona picked up her water bag. "We better get going. I've still got business in town."

THE RETURN TRIP to the homestead was quiet and especially strained when they once more passed by the trees in the distance. Catriona again concentrated on the task at hand rather than acknowledge the copse. In truth, she was lost in her thoughts of her time with Adele and her newfound friendship with Katherine. Things were so difficult at the moment and she was slowly losing the fight over her feelings for Katherine. She wanted Katherine to stay with her. But seeing her everyday created such a painful wound. For all the pain it caused, she knew she wouldn't have it any other way.

Katherine held on as Catriona crossed the entrance gate to the property and turned the wagon toward town. "That was a lot of heavy work today. I expect you're grateful for the assistance you received."

"I appreciate it very much. I know Alexander and I could've managed it between us, although it would've taken much longer. I wonder, sometimes, if it wouldn't be just as easy to employ permanent workers. But in truth I enjoy the solitude being out here provides me."

Katherine placed her hand on Catriona's arm. "Sometimes there's more than physical assistance you can ask for. If there's ever anything you want to speak about, you *can* talk to me. What we discuss will remain private."

Catriona looked at Katherine's hand resting on her forearm. "Thank you, I'll keep it in mind. For the moment I think I better concentrate on the trip to town or we may not get there. We'll be stopping at Susan's store. Is there anything you want while we're there?"

"I'd like to check with Susan on when the books will be arriving. I can't wait to see the look on the children's faces when they get the opportunity to read something different than rain calendars and agricultural manuals. What are you picking up in town?"

Catriona smiled as though she had a secret. "Nothing much. Some farm machinery and a parcel Susan has for me. It'll be a quick stop for it's been a long day and I'm eager to get home and into a bath for a good soak. And by the look of your face we better pick up some malt vinegar. You're as red as a beetroot."

Katherine brought her hand to her cheeks. "I admire your self control." She laughed. "I'm sure it's taking every bit of your self control not to lecture me on the pitfalls of going without a hat."

"I did tell you it's better than getting sunburnt."

Katherine held up a finger, effectively halting any further comment. "I know you did. I'll talk to the father on his return. You said he's a reasonable person. Maybe he'll let me wear a hat."

"If you don't manage to burn to a crisp first," Catriona mumbled, and then dodged Katherine's mock slap.

SUSAN WAS BUSY when they arrived, stopping only long enough to hand Catriona a sizeable brown paper parcel and direct her to the repaired farm implement on the store's verandah. Calling over her shoulder, Catriona invited Susan to dinner when she felt she could spare the time. She jokingly added they might use the formal dining room in celebration of her visit.

Arriving home almost at dusk, their time was taken up with the ritual positioning of the bathtub in the kitchen and the filling of the utilitarian kettle on the stove. Both were thankful for their respective baths. It had been a hot day and, for Catriona, quite a sweaty one.

Finally clean, Catriona sat at the kitchen table and, using a pocket knife, cleaned the dirt from under her fingernails. "I couldn't believe how many people were at the store today."

Katherine placed a plate of smoked ham sandwiches on the table. "I know. I barely had time to ask her about the books."

"What are you complaining about? She just about threw my package at me. Thank heavens she didn't do the same with the malt vinegar. Speaking of which, what did you do with the bottle?"

Katherine toweled dry her curly hair. "It's in the pantry."

Catriona folded the knife, placed it back into its leather holder and put it on the table in front of her. "We'll have to apply some malt vinegar to your face once you've finished with your hair. The vinegar will help remove the sting. Tomorrow you'll need to use some lanolin on your nose to stop it from peeling." Catriona wiped her hands and reached for one of the sandwiches. "Of course this could have been avoided if you'd decided to wear a hat. It's not as if you're committing a mortal sin or anything."

Katherine placed the towel aside on the table and looked at Catriona. "I'm very much aware it's not a sin, but you already know my reasons. Besides, at least your hair is shoulder length. Mine looks like a madman's taken to it. And believe me when I tell you it isn't normally this long. The sisters in Ireland kept a strict regime of haircuts. While vanity isn't something expected of a nun, I'm still a woman and I can't abide when people see that I'm just about bald."

Catriona reached out as if to touch Katherine's hair, but instead picked up Katherine's towel, and placed it over one of the chairs. "Honestly there's nothing wrong with your hair. You should be glad you've the freedom to wear it that long." She touched her locks. "I barely get away with the

scandal of wearing my hair like this. Besides, your curls aren't done justice beneath your stifling habit. Speaking of which, I've something for you."

Catriona passed into the hallway and returned with the parcel Susan had given her. "Before you open this, let's get one thing straight. What I'm about to give you is not charity, nor is it another hat. I know you've got your own money, and I don't want any of it. I'm not taking this back and I *certainly* can't use it if you don't want it." Catriona placed the package in front of Katherine. "Think of it as my thank you for not only being my champion with the town's matriarchs, but also for the being out here with me. I'd forgotten how lonely it can get without female company."

Katherine looked at the brown paper wrapping held by a string and then at Catriona. "It would be rude not to accept your present. Honestly though, I can't think of anything I truly need." She untied the string and pulled the paper aside, revealing two complete habits. She fingered the material. "These are made of cotton," she whispered. Momentarily at a loss for words, she shook one out and pressed it to the front of her chest.

"They look like a perfect fit. How did you manage to do this? You barely have time to sit, much less sew. Thank you very much." Katherine hugged Catriona.

Being consumed by such an embrace was the last thing Catriona had expected, yet everything she wanted. She closed her arms around Katherine, neatly encircling her waist and back. She had long thought about what it would be like to hold her, but reality far exceeded her expectations. She felt the touch of Katherine's wisps of hair on her face. The experience was overpowering and dangerous, yet she could no sooner break away than cut off her own hands.

Katherine pulled out of the embrace. "How did you manage this?"

The moment broken, Catriona sat before she fell down. She looked at Katherine's expectant features. "It was easy. If you remember after your first day here, when your habit was too dirty to wear regardless of your attempts to sponge the stains from it, I told you I'd take it into town for washing."

"Yes, and you did."

"I also asked Susan to have her laundress make up two more habits in a more conventional fabric. You'll find they're exactly the same as your woollen ones, including your bloody veil and wimple. These are much more functional for the hot summer weather.

You'll get good wear from your woollen ones in the winter time."

"Thank you so much." Katherine started toward her, looked at Catriona's face, and then caught herself. "Rest assured, after a good night's rest I fully intend to wear my new habit tomorrow."

Catriona barely managed a 'good night' when Katherine silently left the room. Only then did Catriona remember her promise to dab malt vinegar on Katherine's face to remove the sting of her sunburn. But, in all honesty, she didn't trust herself or her hands not to betray her own

emotions. After placing the remaining sandwiches in the meat safe and the malt vinegar and cloth on the table, in case Katherine returned, she retired to her room.

KATHERINE RETURNED TO the kitchen, thankful she had brought her lamp with her. Sitting on the edge of the table was the vinegar, but Catriona was nowhere to be seen. She uncorked the bottle and dabbed some vinegar on the cloth and reminisced over the evening's recent events. It had been so long since anyone hugged her besides the children. The last adult was her father. Katherine frowned. Hugging Catriona was different. It felt--secure. But if she felt so secure, then why did she break away from her? The more she contemplated her reaction to the hug, the more confused she became. Going over it in her mind didn't help and, in fact, only served to remind her of her own fatigued state. Taking the lamp from the kitchen table, she rose and walked down the corridor to her bed, and to a restless night's sleep.

Chapter Six

KATHERINE LOOKED IN the mirror and grimaced. The taut, stretched skin on her face was a deep shade of red. "I look like I've been working in the convent's boiler room. I'm definitely going to have to speak with the father about wearing a hat."

Taking pains not to aggravate her sunburn, she finished her morning ablutions and headed for the kitchen. She placed a kettle on the stove and wandered to the back door to investigate the sounds coming from the yard.

From her vantage point Katherine watched Catriona undertake repairs to the curing shed. Her preoccupation gave Katherine the opportunity to unobtrusively observe the enigmatic woman. Despite the early hour, her shirt already carried the telltale signs of dirt and perspiration that accompanied manual work. Her sleeves were rolled up to her elbows, revealing slender yet well-formed, brown, sinewy arms. Occasionally she raised one hand to her face in an attempt to shoo away the flies, which relentlessly thrived in the country sun. She swung the hammer in tune to a song she contentedly whistled, oblivious to Katherine's inquisitive stare.

Katherine absentmindedly wiped a cup while she thought on their friendship. It had always been so difficult for her to make friends. Even at the convent, among so many women, she struggled to find someone she could openly confer with. But with Catriona, it was different. She felt like she'd found a true confidant. If Catriona's brother was anything like her, then she could see why Sister Coreen was so attracted to him.

The whistle of the kettle interrupted Catriona's work. She turned to see Katherine and waved. She put the hammer on the wood block and headed toward the kitchen, stopping only to wash her hands before joining Katherine inside.

"I'm glad to see you've wasted no time in getting rid of your woollen habits."

Katherine's stomach fluttered at Catriona's comments. "Thank you once again. I can't believe how well made they are. The seamstress who created these should be congratulated. And to think, they even came complete with veil and wimple. Weren't you a *little* tempted to have them made less the headwear you despise so much?"

Catriona laughed and pulled out a chair. "The thought did cross my mind. However, given your predisposition to not see reason, I was afraid you might not wear them at all. Then the gift would've been a waste."

Katherine responded to the light-hearted barb by throwing a dishrag, which Catriona easily fended. She picked the offending article up off the floor. "And I thought nuns weren't supposed to be violent. I'll have to watch you in the future."

Katherine cocked her arm back to launch another rag and Catriona held up her hands. "Enough, you win this round. If I promise to behave, may I have a cup of tea before I go back into the yard?" She lobbed the cloth at Katherine.

"That's what I was getting you." She caught the rag and returned it to its original place. "And, if you hadn't been so quick to come inside, then you may have had one delivered to you." She poured two cups of tea. "What else do you have to do today?"

Catriona nodded her thanks as she took the cup. "There are a number of minor jobs around the yard which need to be seen to. So I expect the better part of my day will be spent close to the house. What about you?"

"I've some lessons to prepare. Then I thought I might begin with a visit to the Farrell selection, work my way to the Dawson farm, and finish with a call on Mrs. Connor to see how her pregnancy is going." Katherine blew on her tea then took a sip.

"Don't wait too long to head home or you'll be hard pressed to be here before dark." Catriona furrowed her brows. "In fact, if you're leaving the Connor place and the sun's setting, then wait there and I'll come and get you. I'm not particularly keen on you travelling these roads unaccompanied."

Katherine's immediate response was to ask who was to accompany Catriona, but on reflection realised she was right. She wasn't familiar with the roads and tracks of the district. It would be too easy for her to guide the horse and wagon in the wrong direction and get hopelessly lost. "All right, I'll wait."

Catriona grabbed her cup and stood. "I think I'll take this and get back to work."

The lessons Katherine prepared were straightforward arithmetic and reading, incorporating farm life into the exercises, and it wasn't long before she was on her way. With a last wave to Catriona, who had started repairs on the front verandah, she headed the horse and wagon for the gate and her visits for the day.

GIVEN THE FARRELL'S only had the one child, Katherine's visit to them was accomplished in no time. By late morning she left their farm for her next stop. Unfortunately the Dawson's, unlike the Farrell's, had a large brood of energetic children, and Katherine found her hands full managing a bevy of inquiring minds ranging in ages from six to twelve, while becoming painfully aware of her scant breakfast. She was grateful for the offer of lunch. It never ceased to amaze her how the families managed to cope in such an unforgiving environment. Despite their lack of resources, they'd go without food themselves rather than turn out a visitor. Katherine made a mental note to make sure on her next visit to bring something for the family.

The sun was still high when she made her final call of the day to the Connor farm. Her wagon was met by the youngest Connor boy. She hopped down from the wagon and was almost knocked down by Liam's hug.

"Sister Katherine! I've finished the lessons you gave me. Now that I can count properly, papa says he'll let me help him count the sheep when we send them to market.

She gently extricated herself from his grasp. "That's lovely, Liam." She reached up into the wagon and retrieved her meagre parcel of primers. "Can you carry those to the house for me?" Liam's eyes gleamed with barely concealed curiosity. "And no peeking until I say so."

Liam took off and Katherine walked toward the tired figure of Mrs. Connor, waiting in the doorway of their upright slab, one bedroom hut.

"Sister Katherine, what a relief it is to see you," Mrs. Connor said, in a lilting Irish brogue. "I love my children dearly, but between them and," she patted her stomach, "the babe, there aren't enough hours in the day."

"Don't worry. Let me have some time with them. It won't be long, and they'll be too absorbed with their work to worry us. Why don't we go inside Mrs. Connor?" Katherine was painfully aware of the fatigue in Mrs Connor's eyes and stature. "I'll put the kettle on, if you like. Then I'll get the children's lessons underway."

Katherine's eyes took time to adjust to the room. It was not much bigger than the curing shed Catriona repaired earlier in the morning. Katherine couldn't believe so many people could be accommodated in such a confined space. She placed a kettle on the wood stove while Mrs. Connor sat on one of the only sturdy chairs in the hut. She thought it must take tremendous willpower for her to raise a family in such conditions, but she expected life in Australia was better than what Mrs. Connor had left behind in Ireland. At least out here they owned their land.

"You're a saint, sister. And how many times do I have to tell you, call me Mary."

"I'm sorry Mrs--Mary. Now, you make yourself comfortable." She ruffled Liam's hair. "While I see to these rascals."

FINALLY A TEMPORARY silence descended on the room, giving the two the opportunity to talk about Mary's pregnancy without interruption. Between her discussions with Mary and her teaching of the children, Katherine lost track of time.

Mary rose to light another lamp to afford the hut greater light.

Katherine gasped. "Oh my heavens--it's getting dark. I didn't realise we'd been talking for so long."

Mary pulled a pot across to the fire. "With the children as quiet as mice, neither did I." She lifted the lid and stirred the contents. "This is last night's stew but you know what they say--it always tastes better the second day. I don't think we'll have to wait long. Once Joseph smells this, he'll find his way home. You're welcome to share it with us."

Katherine had no idea where Mary's husband, Joseph, was. What she did know was that she was losing light. Mary turned away from the stove and Katherine furtively glanced at the pot's meagre contents. Catriona said to wait, but if she did that it meant dividing the meal for an extra mouth, something she could see the Connors could ill afford.

"Thank you for your kind offer. I better be on my way though, before it gets too dark."

Mary patted her arm as they walked outside. "Maybe next time then?"

Katherine smiled. "Certainly, especially if you're making your lovely pasties. I'll be out next week, with some more lessons for the boys."

Mary jumped at a squeal that emanated from inside the hut. "It sounds like someone's begun tea already. I'll see you next time."

With the shadows from the eucalyptus trees growing longer, Katherine boarded the wagon and turned the horse for home.

She hadn't gone far before she scolded herself for not staying at the Connors. She looked up at the clear twilight sky and grimaced. "My cotton habit is fine for the daytime," she said aloud, shivering, "but these nights are still a tad chilly."

Her body rocked in time to the motion of the wagon and the hairs on the back of her neck rose. Why was it suddenly so silent? The symphony of birds and insects which normally accompanied

this time of evening was noticeably absent. With the exception of the sound of the movement of horse and wagon, the countryside was ominously silent, as if even nature was holding its breath.

She squinted into the last vestiges of the setting sun and scanned the road ahead--for what, she wasn't sure. Suddenly the horse raised its head and its ears pricked. Katherine could make out the silhouette of a rider and horse on the bend ahead. "Oh dear," she muttered. "I expect this is one lecture from Catriona I'm not going to easily avoid."

Despite her foreboding, she was frightened and annoyed at Catriona's mode of meeting her. "I know what you're going to say," Katherine called. "I should have never left the Connor's. I'm sorry. I didn't appreciate how fast night falls here. But you should be ashamed of yourself, sitting there, saying nothing. You're scaring me out of my wits. And you spooked the horse as well. He could have bolted, and heaven only knows what might have happened." Despite the warmth now generated by her indignation, the words uttered next chilled her to the bone.

"Sister, I don't know what or who you're talking about, but I'd lay odds it's not me." Riding slowly out of the sun's final rays was a man, the lower part of his face covered with a handkerchief, and pistols on each of his hips.

Bushrangers! Riveted to her seat, Katherine rapidly assessed her options. She could hardly run him down. He had the advantage of both speed and weaponry. At least his pistols were still holstered. She recalled a story Susan had told her about the gallantry of the local bushrangers toward women. Katherine fervently hoped her words had a foundation of truth and weren't merely legend.

The bushranger halted in front of her horse. He casually leant forward in his saddle, his forearms coming to rest on the pommel.

Katherine tamped down her fear. "If you're who I think you are, then you've picked a very poor target. I'm Sister Flynn, the local sister. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I have nothing of worth. The best you can expect are children's primers. I doubt even *you* would lower yourself to rob from children," she said, nervously defiant as she pulled the reins toward her.

The bushranger let out a deep throaty laugh. "You're wrong, sister. There *is* something you have that I need." Man and horse advanced toward her.

Panicking, Katherine tried to wheel the horse and wagon back the way she'd come. She turned and screamed. Sitting silently astride a horse was yet another man, bareheaded, his face also masked.

Despite the fear coursing through her, she attempted to summon up her last ounce of courage. "I heard your type are not violent toward women or is that only a myth?" On a roll, Katherine gave him no time to reply. "I'm a nun, and even you must know what awaits you, not only in this life but in the hereafter, should you harm me."

The two men laughed in unison.

"Firstly, sister," the hatted man said, "given the life I lead, I already know where I'm headed, and it ain't heaven. So it's no good you trying to frighten me with your fire and brimstone. Besides, I'm more fearful of the pain awaiting me in the world of the living, should I harm a hair on your pretty Irish head. My leader would skin me alive if you got even a scratch."

A spark of hope crossed Katherine's features. "So you're going to let me go? I'm late as it is, and I'm expecting someone to come looking for me any minute." She glanced around, praying Catriona would appear.

"That's not exactly the case. You see, we do need you and we've been waiting all day for you to come back along this road. I can't let you go because, if I return to camp without you, my leader would have my head on a plate, not to mention other parts of my anatomy. I promise you'll come to no harm if you do as you're told. When we're finished, I give you my word I'll bring you right back to this spot. I'm going to cover your eyes, in case you feel the need to bring anyone back to where we're taking you. Don't worry though, honest Ben will ensure your horse doesn't stray."

Katherine had barely time to form any words of protest before the hatted man leaned forward and, in one deft motion, snatched her reins. He grabbed her hands and bound them, and placed a hood down over her head. She wasn't sure whether the sudden onset of darkness, or her own fright was the catalyst, but Katherine promptly fainted.

SHE AWOKE SOME time later, her hood still on and hands tied, with the wagon slowly moving over unsteady ground. She'd no way of knowing how long she'd been unconscious, but obviously long enough to have been pulled from the wagon seat and placed where she was now lying---- where the wagon's provisions were normally stored. Frustrated by her inability to escape, she twisted, trying to right herself. This only resulted in pain to her wrists. Why did they take me, and *where* are they taking me?

After an interminable period of being bound hand and foot, her ears and nose alerted her to their arrival at what could only be the bushranger's camp. The smell of smoke and cooking food heralded suppertime. Katherine's stomach traitorously grumbled, reminding her of how long it had been since she'd eaten.

"What have you got there Geordie?" A voice called out.

"I caught meself a fine figure of a woman, even if she is in that silly bloody get up."

Katherine heard a bushranger laugh. She blushed, angry at being the brunt of someone's joke. The jibes continued, getting more suggestive, and causing raucous laughter with each passing comment.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing?" The tone of authority conveyed by the new voice was not lost on Katherine. "Are you the least bit aware of what you've got in the wagon? It's not some whore you've spirited away to have some fun with. She's a bloody nun! It may have been a while

since any of you've had any religion, but I won't have her treated in this manner. Besides, have you forgotten why we brought her here?"

Katherine listened to the footsteps approaching the side of the wagon and irate voice of whom she presumed was the leader. "Take that bloody hood off her head and for Christ's sake untie her damn hands."

Katherine listened to muffled footsteps hastening toward her. She was helped into a seated position on the wagon's backboards, her hood removed and hands untied.

The leader shook his head in disgust as he walked away. "What did you expect her to do? Beat you with her cross? And give her something to eat. She looks like she could do with a feed. Then take her to Joshua."

His receding footsteps were followed by a flurry of activity. In front of her, silhouetted in the fire's glow, was the hatted bushranger who had kidnapped her. Looking around him, she saw a man spooning out a portion of what looked like stew onto a plate while another cleared a seat for her by the fire.

"I'm sorry, Sister, about the hood and all," the hatted man awkwardly said. "We didn't mean no disrespect with what we said. We was havin' a bit of fun 'tis all." He helped her down from the wagon and led her toward the fire.

"If that's your idea of a joke, I'd hate to see what you're like when you're serious." She sat and graciously accepted the steaming plate offered her. "Now, will someone please explain what you expect from me?"

The man who had offered her the plate of food tipped his hat. "Jim Barrett, sister. It's Joshua, you see. He was winged yesterday in a job we did over at the Moreshead Downs property. We can't take him to a doctor. All he'll do is fix him up so he can be hanged. We heard about you helping others and thought you might be able to help him."

Katherine stopped the food-laden spoon halfway to her mouth. "He's been injured since yesterday, and he's yet to be treated?" She placed the plate down in the dirt in front of her and rose. "My supper can wait. If you're aware of my assistance throughout the district, then you must also know my medical skills are rudimentary, at best. Take me to him please, and I'll see what I can do."

Katherine searched the wagon, hoping the men had brought along her bag. Retrieving it, she sensed someone was observing her from the shadows. She wondered whether this was the same man who had recently chastised the bushrangers. Katherine turned and was taken by Jim Barrett to where Joshua lay.

Katherine looked at the ugly, jagged hole in Joshua's lower leg and sucked in her breath. "Winged is an understatement." She leant forward with a lantern to get a better idea of the size of the wound. Her nostrils filled with the sickly sweet smell of infection which she'd recently been

exposed to while treating an infected toe just last week. She passed the lantern up the leg to Joshua's glazed eyes. Oh Lord, she thought, he's not much more than a boy.

"Your leg's the same length as the other, so I don't think you've broken it. By the looks of it though, you have a fever and your leg's infected." Her eyes scanned her surroundings. "Mr. Barrett, are you there?"

"I'm here, sister."

"I need hot water, clean rags, alcohol and a knife so--"

A voice interrupted her, the same voice she heard when she first arrived. "Jim, get her the water, rags and alcohol. Christ knows we've got far too much of that. But *no* knife."

Katherine glanced over her shoulder, searching for its owner. "If you won't give it to me, then at least have someone cut open his trouser leg, so I can better access the wound." The figure blended back into the shadows.

Jim Barrett returned and sliced away the lower part of Joshua's trouser leg.

"Can I have more light?" Another lantern miraculously appeared, and Katherine commenced the work of cleaning and dressing his leg. She wondered how someone so young had gotten caught up in a life of theft. Save for occasional hissing, the boy was silent while she endeavoured to clean the infection from the wound. Finished, she wiped her hands on the skirt of her habit and then stood.

"Mr. Barrett I've done all I can. Joshua has a fever from the infection and unless it breaks..." Katherine let the ramifications hang between them. She glanced around. "As most of you are already asleep, it's clear I'm going nowhere tonight. If you don't mind I'll sit with him."

Jim Barrett hesitated, and she realised he was weighing up the options of letting her do just that. "I've no idea where I actually am, so I'm unlikely to escape. Besides, I wouldn't leave a person in need. Go on. I'll look after him." Katherine returned her attention to Joshua. She was vaguely aware of Jim Barrett's shuffling feet of indecision before he turned and walked into the darkness.

Despite being alone, she felt no fear. After the chastising words uttered on her arrival, from the man whom she assumed was the leader, Katherine felt it unlikely any of his gang would risk attacking her. She wondered if it had been the leader watching her while she was tending Joshua. She knew someone was still there, just out of her peripheral vision.

Katherine jumped when a figure appeared by her side.

"I expect by now you're hungry." This time when the familiar voice spoke it wasn't so deep as before. "Jim managed to hold a bit of supper for you and some tea as well. I told him I'd bring this over. After all, not only do I owe you my gratitude, but we've not yet been introduced." Reflected in the fire's shadows was a woman in men's clothes, her hair cropped, much like

Katherine's. Crouching down, the woman put the cup on the ground, and offered the plate to Katherine. "I'm Mary Carraghan, the leader of this unruly crew."

Katherine couldn't help how her jaw dropped. "Bbut you're a woman."

Mary sat beside Katherine. "It's good to see some people still know the difference. After living with this bunch for so long, I'm often mistaken for a man. I know you sent Jim packing, but if you don't mind I'd like to sit with you a while. Joshua hasn't been with us very long, and I've a responsibility for his welfare."

Katherine nodded, too stunned to reply. She took a sip of her tea and composed herself. "How does a woman get involved in a venture such as this?"

Mary pulled off a pair of leather gloves, tucked them under her arm, and lit a cigarette from the coals of the fire. "How does any man find himself caught up in such a venture? Poverty doesn't discriminate, Sister Flynn. It hits women as hard, if not *harder*, than men."

"How do you know my name?"

"It would be surprising if I *didn't*. You're becoming quite well known around the district for your kindness to others. Had it not been the case I would've never had my men, shall we say, invite you to our camp."

Katherine's eyes flared and Mary held up a hand. "I'm sorry for how the invitation was served, but I've a responsibility to my gang and myself. I still can't be sure you won't leave this place and lead the constabulary right back here."

Katherine's face lit up. "So, you're going to let me go?"

Mary raised her face to the stars. "For Christ's sake, of course we're going to let you go! If we didn't I'd have more people on my heels than I could poke a stick at, no doubt led by one Miss Catriona Pelham."

Katherine choked down her food at the thought of Catriona scouring the countryside in search of her. What would she do when she finally found her? She should have known to wait for Catriona. She struggled to swallow the lump of food caught in her suddenly dry throat. She didn't know what was worse: being held by bushrangers, or facing Catriona's wrath.

She ate her meal in silence while Mary finished her cigarette. Mary got up once to check on Joshua and sponge his brow, after which she returned to the proximate warmth of the fire.

"Sister, you're going to burst if you don't speak what's on your mind." Mary pulled a flask from her jacket pocket and took a sip.

While she ate her meal, Katherine had been aware of Mary's eyes on her. For reasons she couldn't explain, her attention unsettled her. "Miss Carraghan,"

"Given the rather social circumstances, Mary will suffice."

Katherine thought she seemed to be taking a perverse enjoyment in her discomfort. She glared at Mary. "Are there many female bushrangers? Do you enjoy such a lifestyle?"

"I don't rightly know if there are any other female bushrangers. As for liking what I do, it's better than what I left behind. I married when I was young, to a man who unfortunately took a greater interest in the bottle than he did his land. Bushranging had its hardships at first. But I've grown fond of this life. I'm sure there are many women in the predicament I was in who, if given the chance, might be tempted to leave their husbands."

She took another sip from her flask. "I try to do my best to help some of the women in the district with the meagre profits we make. But in truth, for them it's a vicious circle, of which I was lucky to escape. You're shivering. Where are my manners? Have a sip. It'll warm you up."

Katherine hesitated then took the flask from Mary's outstretched hand. Her fingers grazed Mary's and she experienced the same unsettling feeling she'd felt earlier, like her stomach was still hungry and yet she was full. Covering her confusion, she raised the flask to her lips and drank. Katherine spluttered as the fiery liquid coursed down her throat. "It's rum, isn't it?"

Mary rubbed a knuckle down the bridge of her nose. "Yes, it is."

"Don't you miss being with your husband? I mean, I know there are men here. But don't you miss being with him?"

"Given everything, I can't rightly say I miss him. As for the men out here, they don't interest me either. My interest lies, you might say, in ones of the fairer sex." Mary casually lit another cigarette.

Katherine took a few moments to digest Mary's words. Thinking back to Ireland, she'd once heard the servants speak of people who shared the love of the same gender. But she'd thought that was gossip. Shocked and confused, she fell back on familiar territory. "How can you, when the Bible clearly forbids such acts?"

"Unless you haven't already noticed, I think my actions as a bushranger have already guaranteed my mortal fate. So I expect the issue of my interest in women will be bunched in together with me being an outlaw. And besides, Sister, how many times can you be damned?"

As Katherine fought to understand, an unfamiliar feeling again entered her stomach. "Mrs. Carraghan."

"Mary."

Katherine gritted her teeth. "Damnation is not simply a matter of one bad act covering a series of other bad acts. How can you live in such a manner with another woman?"

"Why don't you stop and think about what you've just said? Do you not live out on the Pelham property? Is that not where the Pelham male is currently away, as he is for the greater majority of the year? Does that not leave *you* living with a woman? If you weren't a nun, what do you think would be said about you?" Mary threw her cigarette into the fire and stood.

Katherine jumped up and stood toe to toe with Mary. "How, how dare you! How dare you even insinuate the life you pursue and the fact that Catri...Miss Pelham and I share the same house is even remotely the same? We're nothing but friends, and she's been gracious enough to let me stay with her after my home was ruined in a dust storm. How dare you insinuate such impropriety!" She was close enough to Mary to smell the liquor and tobacco on her breath. Katherine's breathing quickened and her stomach, unbidden, drummed out a tattoo of its own. Pride and anger forced her to remain in her spot.

Mary stood her ground. "If that's all there is, then why are you so angry?"

Stumped for words Katherine turned on her heel. "I'm going to check on Joshua. *You* can stay right here."

While she tended Joshua, out of the corner of her eye Katherine saw Mary shake her head and take another sip from her flask. She had no idea how the bushranger could ever think the friendship between her and Catriona was the same kind of friendship she shared with other women. Yet Mary's intimations left her with an unsettled feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Finally satisfied that the boy was sleeping soundly, she had no other choice than to return to the fire, where Mary had made herself comfortable. Their earlier discussion wasn't revisited, and Mary instead chose to regale her with stories of bushranging and narrow escapes. Katherine listened inattentively, a part of her mind still playing over Mary's words, regarding her and Catriona, while another part tried to rationalise her body's reactions to Mary's proximity.

KATHERINE AWOKE TO the gentle shaking of her shoulder. She looked up at Mary, who looked as tired as Katherine felt. "Did you get any sleep, Mary?"

"Not a lot. I stayed up with Joshua."

Katherine sat bolt upright and looked to where the boy lay. "Is he all right?"

"Yes," Mary replied. "The fever's broken. Hopefully, he's on the mend. I expect it's time we got you on your way, or I'll have the town after me."

In the early light of dawn, Katherine's hands were again loosely tied and a hood placed over her head. Jim Barrett led the wagon this time, all the while thanking her for helping Joshua. When they reached the road, her hands were untied and, when the sound of horses had sufficiently receded into the distance, she took the hood from her head. She took her bearings and the reins and turned horse and wagon for home, her thoughts filled with the events of the previous night.

CATRIONA, HAVING SPENT a sleepless night worrying over Katherine, was confirming the scope of the search, when her concentration was broken by the sound of a man yelling inside the house. Breaking through the parlour door, the man skidded to a halt on the polished wooden floors, barely managing to keep his balance. "She's back! Sister Flynn's back! Coming up the driveway as bold as brass you might say." He turned, again skidding on the floor, and then returned from whence he came.

Catriona's heart leapt with relief at the news. Her relief was short-lived. Clenching her jaw in an attempt not to swear in front of the group of men, she turned on her heel and made her way out the front door.

SEEING CATRIONA ON the steps reminded Katherine of Mary's words. Surely no one thought of Catriona and her in that manner? Did they? She climbed off the wagon.

"Where the *hell* have you been," Catriona demanded, hands on hips. "Do you ever listen to anything I say? Didn't I tell you to wait at the Connor place? I told you if it became dark I'd come for you. But no, such a sensible idea clearly wasn't good enough for you, was it? I rode over there last night only to have Mrs. Connor tell me you had left on dusk. Dusk, Katherine, when it's getting dark for God's sake! I've been up most of the night as have a number of the men from nearby farms waiting to form a search party. And you ride up here like if you've been to town and back, instead of being away God only knows where all night!"

For once Catriona's anger had the opposite effect. Rather than react, Katherine composed herself by first tying the reins of the horse to a nearby tree and checking the brake of the wagon. "I'm sorry. I know now I should have listened. I was taken by the bushrangers."

Catriona's hands clenched into fists, and her lips formed a narrow line.

"However, I'm all right."

Katherine looked past Catriona's bristling figure to the men standing behind her.

"Gentlemen, thank you for offering to help look for me. I'm eternally grateful and very touched. As you can see, I'm back and unscathed. Now if you'd like to move into the kitchen, I'm sure I can prepare some breakfast for all of us." The men shuffled back inside the house, seemingly grateful to put some distance between themselves and the two women. Katherine walked up the steps, briefly meeting Catriona's angry blue eyes. "This is not the end of this, Catriona," she quietly said.

"You're *damned* right it isn't!" Catriona forced her words through gritted teeth as she followed Katherine into the house.

Despite her fatigue, Katherine prepared breakfast for the group while politely answering the questions from the town's police constable. No, she didn't recognise any of the people who had abducted her. Yes, she'd been treated well because she cooperated in ministering to an injured man. Sorry, but she couldn't lead the constable back to where she'd been, due to her being hooded during the journey. Frustrated that the bushrangers had again escaped his grasp, the constable sat and sullenly ate his breakfast.

THE GROUP WAS barely out of eye and earshot when Catriona turned to Katherine. "Inside, now!" She grasped Katherine's arm and propelled her into the study and strong-armed her into an armchair.

Despite her attempts to check her temper, Catriona knew she was losing the battle. "Do you have *any* idea what sort of danger you were in last night? You could have been killed or injured and left for the dingoes to finish! Bushrangers are not some romantic vision you may have inside that crazy head of yours. They're desperate men."

Katherine took a deep breath and exhaled. "Firstly, I'm an adult, not a child, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk to me as if I was a child. And, secondly, as you've already heard, I wasn't in any danger. They needed help. The leader stayed with me all night, so I doubt any of the men would have thought the risk of assaulting me worth the reward."

"That's *great*. The leader spent the whole night with you! And who protected you from him? Your damned habit won't protect you from everything." She placed her hands on the arms of the chair Katherine was in, effectively trapping her. "For God's sake, you could have been raped!"

Katherine cryptically smiled. "I had nothing to fear from the leader. And, as for the leader raping me, that's extremely unlikely. The leader was a woman, something I neglected to tell the good Constable Ford."

Exasperated Catriona stepped back and vigorously rubbed her face. "Man, woman, or well trained monkey--I don't care! You can't go running off to help someone without leaving some sort of message."

"Have you been listening to me? I *didn't* run off. I was abducted! Between my hands being tied, a hood placed on my head, and fainting, I had no time to leave you a note!" Katherine rose from the chair and stood near Catriona at the mantel. "Be reasonable, for heaven's sake. You can't always be looking after me, ensuring I'm safe. I have my own responsibilities to the families of the district."

As Catriona gripped the mantelpiece, the cloth of Katherine's habit lightly brushed her arm. She looked away, fearful of being betrayed by the raw desire rippling through her.

"I know last night couldn't have been easy," Katherine softly said. "What you need to understand is I need my freedom as much as you do yours. To come and go as I please, without taking *you* away from work on the farm. If you can't respect that then I'll have to seek a place in town."

Catriona turned, her tortured eyes seeking Katherine's. She took Katherine's hand in her own. "I'm sorry if you think I'm smothering you. I didn't mean for you to feel that way. You must know I care for you. I'd hate to see you come to harm in a place you're still learning about. I-- I...," she searched Katherine's face, suddenly at a loss for words. Shaking her head, Catriona released Katherine's hand and walked out of the study, silently closing the door behind her.

KATHERINE REMAINED RIVETED to the place by the mantel where Catriona left her, the words spoken by Mary the previous evening reverberating in her mind. She looked down at her trembling hand. When Catriona touched her hand--she'd felt her body begin to warm with a fire from deep within, like it had the previous night with Mary. Shaking her head in an attempt to unravel her thoughts, she left the study and went to her room.

Chapter Seven

MRS. MONTEITH PASSED a plate laden with soggy cucumber sandwiches to Katherine. Katherine's stomach lurched. She would never get used to them. Why did her hostess insist on serving them when it was so hot? "Thank you." She held up her hand. "I don't think I could eat another bite."

"But, my dear, you're wasting away. Are you sure you're being well treated at Gleneagle?" Mrs. Monteith took the plate and placed it to one side. She conspiratorially leant toward her. "I heard what happened after your kidnapping," she whispered. "Miss Pelham's outburst--such horrendous vulgarity."

"Miss Pelham wasn't entirely at fault. I failed to listen to her sage advice and paid the price for my impetuosity." Katherine could only imagine what her life here would have been like had Mrs. Monteith or anyone from the committee met her at the train. Katherine inwardly shuddered while she finished her tea. She'd never have been allowed to travel unescorted within a stone's throw of committee homes, let alone roam the district.

She glimpsed the clock on the mantelpiece. "My heavens, is that the time?" Katherine rose. "Thank you so much for your hospitality. But, sadly, I must be on my way."

"You've only just arrived," Mrs. Monteith protested.

"The Lord's work is never done." Katherine resolved herself to ask God's forgiveness for such a blatant white lie.

"Of course," Mrs. Montieth spluttered as she walked Katherine to the door. "Maybe next week you can stay longer."

AS SHE DROVE the wagon toward the greater part of town, Katherine's thoughts lingered on the silent truce negotiated between her and Catriona regarding her over-protectiveness and Katherine's demand she not be mothered as if she were a child. As a result, the two now very rarely spent the whole day together, both freely absorbed in their own work.

Despite Catriona's outburst on the day of her return, Katherine felt the disagreement had strengthened their friendship. Of an evening, over dinner, they still found time to talk about the day's activities. That was the time she enjoyed most--when Catriona was least guarded. Yet there were occasions when she felt Catriona held her at arm's length and this confused Katherine. Then there were moments when she caught Catriona staring at her in an unfathomable way, as if she were measuring her against someone else. She concluded Catriona was comparing her to the way Sister Coreen cared for the families of the district. Katherine carefully manoeuvred the wagon to a stop outside Susan's store.

"Hello there." Susan made her way around the counter to close the front door of the shop. "Can I offer you a cup of tea?"

"Oh please, no. I've spent the past hour being plied with milky tea and soggy cucumber sandwiches by Mrs. Montieth."

Susan made a face. "I'm glad I'm not you." The two shared a laugh. "Honestly, you have the patience of a saint."

Katherine sighed. "I know I must visit them, despite the fact I feel we have literally *nothing* in common. Still, they provide at least some amount of support to the less fortunate."

"So, you're not moving in with one of them?" Susan asked, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"Now I know you're making fun of me. Certainly not. I prefer where I am and the friendship I have with Catriona and, indeed, you. You both provide such an invaluable insight into the district."

Susan lightly touched her throat. "Thank you. I'm very honoured to be your friend."

"I don't know what it is but you and Catriona understand me so much more than possibly any one else I've known, including my mother."

"Didn't you have friends in the convent?"

"No one I could call as such. Most of the nuns were either old women, who'd been in the calling for a lifetime, or painfully shy teenage novices, neither of whom offered any opportunity for close friendships. Prior to that, I could have counted my close friends on one hand. At least with you two we share similar interests.

Susan cleared her throat. "Yes, well some at least." She looked over as the shop door opened. "My work is never done. I promise I'll pay you two a visit, and then we can sit down and talk without interruption.

"That would be lovely." Katherine made her way toward the door. "I'll see you then, or next time I'm in town."

CATRIONA JOTTED DOWN the most recent amount of rain in her farmer's almanac. "That's about the same amount as last time." She placed the pencil on the table and flicked through the almanac's pages. It had rained the day Alexander left. She checked the date and her eyes widened. That was six weeks ago. It wouldn't be long before he returned.

She tiredly rubbed her hand across the back of her neck. How am I going to tell him? She glanced to the delicate water colour of Coreen that she'd painted for him when he told her of their engagement. She believed that with Coreen he'd finally found something to live for, rather than merely existing. She could only hope that Katherine was present to help her break the news. Catriona sighed. Oh Katherine, if you only knew how much I need you.

Reminiscing on the morning of Katherine's return from the bushrangers, she shuddered at how close she'd come to telling Katherine the truth--that she cared for her more deeply than she had for anyone in a long time. Since then, her continual restraint had meant many restless nights, her dreams filled with thoughts of Katherine. She was at least thankful for the stone walls of the house and her closed door. For she was sure, that more than once, she'd awoken calling Katherine's name.

"I can't go on like this. It's time I spoke with Susan. I'll head in tomorrow. After all, Wednesday's usually a quiet day in the store."

THE FOLLOWING MORNING after a quick goodbye to Katherine, she headed in to town, to the only other person she had confidence would keep her secret. She cast her mind back to the first time she and Susan had met and began a friendship that had steadily grown over the last three years.

SUSAN'S INITIAL ARRIVAL had caused its own share of excitement, consternation, and curiosity. She'd arrived without a husband, carrying only her luggage, and accompanied by a

quiet Chinese woman. What surprised the townspeople the most was how Susan had bought the local mercantile shop outright, and with cash--a feat rarely seen in the town. She then proceeded to launch a full-scale expulsion of years of slow-moving and useless stock. Once that was accomplished, she cleaned and repainted the store. Restocking it caused a great deal of interest with the local community. For the first time the mercantile catered to men *and* women. There were bolts of cloth, soaps, and perfume not normally seen that far from Sydney. Susan also cleaned and repaired the ramshackle laundry at the back of the store, which was run by the Chinese woman who'd arrived with her.

Catriona immediately liked Susan, who remained unperturbed by her blunt manner and men's clothes. She spent quite a lot of time helping her at the store, while at the same time attempting to strike up a friendship with the quietly spoken Me Lin.

One day Catriona came into the store to find the main counter unoccupied. Presuming Susan was out the back having lunch, Catriona walked around the counter and into the kitchen, where she found Susan in Me Lin's arms. Aside from Adele, she'd never seen two women in an intimate embrace.

Shocked, Catriona stumbled backward, desperately hoping they hadn't heard her, only to trip on the kitchen rug and awkwardly fall. The couple, interrupted by the noise, instantly separated.

"Are you alright?" Susan helped Catriona to a chair.

"I--I'm fine," Catriona managed, as Me Lin quietly left the room.

Susan pulled a clear glass bottle of Moscatel and two glasses out of the kitchen cupboard. She wordlessly poured two measures and passed a glass of amber fluid to Catriona. "This might help."

Susan took a sip, placed the glass on the table, and looked at Catriona. "I expect you're confused by what you saw. I wouldn't be surprised if you felt the need to never speak to me again. But I'd like to explain something. Sometimes people can be happy with their own company, like you, for example. Most of the time women are happier finding a man to share the rest of their life with. Occasionally this isn't so, and people find happiness with their own." She placed her hands flat on the table. "I'm one of those people, as is Me Lin. We *were* both married. But neither of us ever before had the kind of happiness we've experienced together. I'm aware of how the town and society would view our relationship. But we're happy, and I suspect there aren't too many people who can say that.

"I'd never want to jeopardise our friendship. If you can't countenance my private affairs, then I'll understand. If so, then all I ask is that you go and do so in silence. Such news in a town like this would force me to move again, and I don't want to have to do that."

Catriona felt her tears fall. "I thought it was only me and Adele." She put her head in her hands. She was remotely aware of the scraping of a chair and Susan's arm encircling her shoulder.

"Oh, Catriona, it isn't only you. What happened between you and your friend?"

"She was my governess and we fell in love. My mother found out." Catriona sniffled. "She called Adele all sorts of terrible things and told her to leave, and told me I'd be doomed to hell if I ever lay with a woman again."

Susan softly stroked her back. "I don't know what to say."

Catriona rubbed her eyes. "I don't care what my mother said. I'm *not* interested in men. But out here it's so difficult. I've never found anyone else. I thought we were the only ones. It's been so hard not having someone to talk to."

Susan smiled. "And now you have me. Rest assured, if you ever need to talk then I'll be here."

Susan's offer was one Catriona had rarely taken up, but she would today.

RELUCTANT TO GO directly to the store, Catriona instead filled her morning discussing crops and the latest harvesting devices at the farmer's cooperative, before visiting the town blacksmith, Robert Young.

"But Miss Pelham," Robert protested, "I only re-shod your horse last month. I don't think he'd need to be re-shod so soon."

"He stumbled a day ago. I want to ensure nothing was caught in his hind hoof. Can you check it for me?"

"Of course I can." He raised the horse's hind hoof and inspected it. "It's the least I can do, given what you've done for my mother and father, when times were tough."

Catriona deprecatingly shrugged as she leant against the foundry shed. "Is there any news of late?"

Robert wiped the hoof pick against his leather apron. "The constable's beside himself with all the recent bushranging activity. Mind you, I think the bushrangers will be well gone before he can catch them."

The two shared a laugh and Robert stood. "Two days ago I shod a man's horse. He came from Weewaa. He said he'd seen Father Cleary there."

Weewaa was only thirty miles away. Not more than two day's ride. He must be on his way home, Catriona thought. She reached into her pocket. "How much do I owe you?"

Robert smiled. "When you charge me for your generosity, then *I'll* do the same."

Catriona nodded her thanks and headed toward her real reason for today's visit to town. She walked through the mercantile's front door and silently acknowledged Susan who was busy discussing cloth with Mrs. Greystone. The conversation amused Catriona. Despite the fact that Susan worked in the store, in terms of relative wealth, both women were on reasonably equal footing. Despite this, Mrs. Greystone continued to treat Susan like she was one of her house servants rather than a businesswoman of means.

"And the flour my cook bought from you last week." Mrs. Greystone clucked her tongue. "Substandard. She can do nothing with it."

"Maybe it's your bloody drunken cook," Catriona murmured.

Mrs. Greystone's head turned ever so slightly toward Catriona, and yet she continued to ignore her. "Make sure the next bag is better." She tossed money on the counter, picked up her parcel and, without a goodbye, left the store.

Susan folded the rest of the bolt of cloth. "Good morning. Do you think your comment could've been any louder?" She returned the cloth to its compartment.

"I don't know how you do it. You always manage to remain so polite with those women. I certainly couldn't. In fact I probably would've ended up strangling her with the bloody cloth." Catriona laughed at the thought of seeing Mrs. Greystone throttled in blue watered silk.

Susan shared the joke. "You can't make money by choking your customers. Word gets around, you know."

"And her comment about the flour. She's got a drunken cook, that's all." Catriona scratched her head. "Mind you, her cook's not the only one who's had problems with your flour."

"What do you mean?"

"Katherine tried her hand at cooking the other day. She cooked a batch of scones. It took four spoons of jam and two cups of tea to get one down. I suggested we could leave them out the back, to pitch at the occasional crow and she yelled at me."

Susan looked at a pile of flour sacks and frowned.

"Maybe there *is* something wrong with the flour."

Catriona chuckled. "Not unless there's also something wrong with your meat. I let her cook breakfast the other day and she charred two perfectly good pieces of breakfast steak. It took me all day to get the smoke out of the house. I honestly don't think she's yet mastered the art of cooking."

"That's to be expected, especially given her upbringing prior to her joining the convent."

"That might be the case, but as for that bloody Greystone woman, she's simply got a cook who I expect spends too much time drinking the cooking sherry and anything else she can get her hands on. Of course, working for that old prune, I can hardly say I blame her."

"I'm sure you didn't come all the way in to town to talk about rude old Mrs. Greystone and her drunken help. How can I help you?"

Suddenly shy, Catriona made a pretence of looking at the various jars and utensils on the shelves. At the hat stand she picked one up and idly tried it on. "I thought I'd drop in and say hello."

Susan smothered a laugh. "Is that all? I've never known you to engage in frivolous chatter in the middle of the day." She stepped around the counter to lock the door. "How about we go to the kitchen for some lunch? Unfortunately my breakfast was rather rushed and I'm starved."

Catriona was relieved to have the opportunity to talk uninterrupted with Susan. Damn it, she thought, where do I begin?

Settling down to tea and sandwiches, Susan patiently waited, hands in her lap.

"I think I have a problem, well not a problem as such, but something I need to speak to someone about. I don't exactly know how to put this but--oh, damn it! How do I tell you this?" Standing up, Catriona walked in ever decreasing circles around the kitchen.

"Can I presume you've found someone?"

"How did you know?" Worried, Catriona stared at Susan. "Has someone been talking to you?"

"Of course they have. It's all I've heard in my store during the past week." At Catriona's shocked look, Susan hurried on. "Of course no one has spoken to me but, for God's sake, sometimes you're so easy to read. Have a look at yourself. You're pacing around the kitchen with your hands in your pockets. And I swear, in *all* the time I've known you, I've *never* known you to try on a lady's bonnet covered with flowers, like you did in the store just a while ago." With a hint of laughter in her voice, she said, "I have to tell you it definitely didn't go with the moleskins."

Catriona blushed, not realising how distracted she'd been. "How do you always know something's going on before I tell you? You were the same when I told you about Coreen and Alexander." She took a seat opposite Susan. "I have found someone, but I don't know what to do about it. I mean it's not as easy as it looks." She dragged her fingers through her hair. "I believe we have a lot in common, but I don't know if she realises my feelings run deeper than friendship."

"I'm surprised it's taken you so long to come and speak with me then. Has she given you any indicator she wants more than friendship?"

"No. She acts like she's so happy though, and I think I could be too, if I wasn't so frustrated." Catriona again attempted to stand.

"Sit down. You make me dizzy moving around the kitchen like a willy-willy blown about by the wind. Perhaps you should tell me who this person is. I can't possibly help you if I don't know her name."

"It's Katherine. Don't look at me like that, Susan! I didn't plan it this way, it just happened. I can't help myself, but every time I look at her I want to take her in my arms and kiss her." Taking in Susan's stunned features, she hurriedly added, "Rest assured, haven't done anything."

"It's a good thing you haven't. Something tells me she's never been kissed by a woman. After all, you must remember what she is."

"Don't you think I'm aware of that?" Catriona said in frustration. "Everyday she gets up and puts her damned habit on. It's like a full body chastity belt!"

Susan laughed. "I suppose it is. When did you decide you liked her?"

"I felt something the first day at the train station. You should have seen her, slumped asleep against the wall covered in dust. She looked like a long lost treasure. I realised how strong my feelings were when she started working with the families of the district. They speak so well of her, and she works so hard at helping them. And she's so excited when she talks about the children, like they were part of her family. It's not just this or her beauty. She has the most wonderful stubborn streak I've seen." Catriona stared into space, oblivious to the gushed praises spilling from her mouth.

"Stubborn streak my backside! You *still* leave her for dead in that area. I must admit though, she has her own memorable way of doing things. She may not have given you any sign she wants anything more than friendship, but are you sure that's all she wants? Why does she persist in living out there with you rather than living in town?" Susan leant forward to top up their tea. "Has *anything* happened which may have conveyed to you even an inkling her feelings go deeper?"

"I don't think she can see herself living in any of the wealthy households in town." Casting her mind back to the goings on of the past week Catriona carefully chose her next words. "And in relative terms, living out at my property allows her to basically come and go as she pleases--to tend to the families of the district as well as her own affairs. She has also told me she feels the farm life suits her."

Catriona bit her lip. "Whether her feelings run any deeper than friendship, we do share a sort of intimacy. But this could be that of close female friends. I haven't had many, so I have no yardstick to measure her actions by. Although, recently, there've been a couple of moments which have caused me to wonder. You remember the cotton habits Me Lin made?" Susan nodded. "The night I gave them to her she hugged me. At first I wasn't sure what to do so I hugged her back. She has such a petite waist my arms went right around her. Now, I've hugged you, Me Lin, and Alexander. Yet this was different. We lingered in the hug for longer than I suppose might be thought proper. She eventually broke it off, but she seemed different for it."

"Are you sure she wasn't merely confused? After all, you must admit she wouldn't have been exposed to too much body contact behind convent walls. Did she discuss it with you at all?"

"No, she hasn't, but her actions toward me didn't change after the incident. There was another thing. I don't know if you heard, but I was somewhat cross with her after the business with the bushrangers."

Susan guffawed. "Is that what you call it? It's not what I heard. From what Mr. Connor said, Katherine was lucky she didn't end up over your knee for a good spanking."

Catriona blushed. "I wasn't *that* angry," she muttered.

Susan reached across the table and patted Catriona's hand. "You must be careful. It'll do you no good to be seen arguing with her--and in front of so many of the men. When will you learn to curb your temper?"

"Maybe my actions were a bit rash. But I was worried sick with her disappearance. Anyway, we had words in the study after the men were gone, and I impulsively grabbed her hand. Susan, I felt her react to the touch, I'm sure of it."

Susan's brow creased. "Are you sure you're not looking for something which isn't there? If so, anything you do to make your feelings obvious may be disastrous."

Catriona raised her face to the ceiling and released an exasperated breath. "I don't know what to do. I crave her company so badly it's like a continuing ache in the pit of my stomach, which is only made worse through knowing she's almost untouchable. I'm sure it would go away if she weren't at the property, but this would only be replaced by the pain of distance and longing to see her. And, let's face it, I couldn't see myself strolling up to the front door of the Greystone mausoleum, knocking on the door, and asking for the town's nun."

Susan made a face. "No, you couldn't do that. I'd like to say everything will be all right and she does or *will* grow to like you. In relationships like ours, romantic endings are what fairy tales are made of. I can't give you any quick solutions to this, for any resolution is just as likely to unravel. I caution you on pressing your hand. Take things slowly, for both yours and Katherine's sake."

Catriona failed to hide her disappointment.

"I know I've mentioned this to you previously, but have you given any further consideration to leaving town and moving to the city? At least there you've a greater sense of anonymity than you have here. I'm not saying it'll be easier for you to find anyone. But it's not as likely to raise as much attention."

Catriona vigorously shook her head. "I could no sooner leave here than have her move out of the house. Besides, Alexander would have to manage the farm alone and that's not fair. I hear what you're saying though and I'll tread carefully. You never know, things change. Maybe she will as

well. I expect it's the only thing I can hope for." She fell silent, her face downcast and her hands flat on the table.

Susan took Catriona's hands in her own. "Remember, Miss Pelham, there's no need to keep this bottled up. As I've said many times--I'm here." She raised her brow. "I tell you what might be a good idea. Let's show Katherine another perspective of life. Take that horrified look off your face. What I mean is maybe you should have Me Lin and me out for dinner. This may serve to prompt her to ask questions about us." Susan smiled. "If there's one thing Katherine isn't lacking, it's forthrightness. If she does ask, then I'm happy for you to answer her questions or send her to me, whatever's most comfortable for you. Something tells me what's told to her in confidence will remain so."

"Thank you for listening. And I appreciate your suggestion about dinner. It's a good idea. I'm honoured and touched by your offer to allow me to talk to her about you and Me Lin. I expect you're aware of the risk you're taking." Catriona squeezed Susan's hand. "I may not have the wisdom in life you do, but should you ever wish to speak to me about anything then I'll be there for you."

Susan laughed. "Rest assured I will. I don't easily forget the person who extended a hand of friendship when I first arrived. You made my acceptance into this community easier than it might have been. But that's what friends are for, best you remember that." She placed the crockery in the washbasin. "If I'm to stay in business, I'd better reopen this store."

Catriona rose and followed Susan out to the main part of the mercantile. Only one customer made his way up the steps, but all the same he managed, through his sheer presence, to halt Catriona in her stride. Susan unlocked the door and stepped aside.

"Good afternoon and welcome back from your trip, Father Cleary," Susan said as the father strode through the door. "It's no doubt good to be back home again."

"Thank you, Mrs. Crosier. It is indeed good to be back." Father Cleary took off his hat. "I heard the town has suffered a great tragedy. I'm truly sorry I couldn't be here, but the news took some time to reach me. I understand many lives were lost, including Sister Coreen's. I can't express how much she will be missed. She was so very well liked within the district."

He turned to Catriona. "Hello, Miss Pelham. I believe Sister Coreen's replacement is currently residing at Gleneagle?" He leant closer so his next words weren't overheard. "Is Mr. Pelham aware of Sister Coreen's passing?"

"No, Father, he hasn't returned from his recent trip," Catriona quietly replied, despite the fact that, through her, Susan was well aware of Alexander and Coreen's relationship.

"No doubt he'll be returning home soon. If there's any assistance I can give you in this matter, please let me know." Raising his voice to its normal tone he added, "I expect I'd better meet the new sister, but not today. Can I call on you tomorrow? There are many things we need to discuss."

Catriona's throat was suddenly dry, and she swallowed nervously. "Of course Father, you're always welcome. Would eleven o'clock be suitable?"

"Lovely. It will give me a chance to pay a quick call on Mrs. Greystone and her ladies' committee. Eleven o'clock it is then." Father Cleary strode toward Susan to discuss purchases he wished to make.

Catriona and Susan exchanged a quick glance. Knowing she had no further reason for being in the store, Catriona nodded goodbye, walked down the steps, and mounted her horse.

THE TRIP HOME gave Catriona ample time to go over her discussion with Susan. Susan was right about Katherine and her. The only thing she could do was to wait. For all the waiting in the world though, there were no guarantees that Katherine's feelings would change. Catriona sighed. At least they shared a strong friendship. Maybe a dinner between the four women might help things along.

As for Father Cleary's return, Catriona wasn't sure what to expect. He had strong ties with the town's matriarchs, and this was understandable. Living in a country town wasn't easy and money wasn't readily parted with. He needed to maintain a financial patronage from the richer families. Without their monetary assistance, neither he nor the modest town church would survive. But did his ties go so far as sympathising with their attitudes? If that's the case, then she expected it wouldn't be long before Katherine was stuck with one of those families. She frowned, thinking maybe he wouldn't send her in to town. After all, despite his refusal to bless Alexander and Coreen's union, he didn't dismiss it out of hand.

Although this gave Catriona a glimmer of hope, there was a niggling thought at the back of her mind. Maybe he'd remember what happened to the last sister who resided at Gleneagle, and try to stop something similar occurring. The irony of the situation made Catriona ruefully grin. In essence, at least on her own behalf, what happened with Alexander and Coreen was *exactly* what was happening.

She had reached no greater resolve by the time she arrived home. The matter wasn't helped by Katherine's appearance while Catriona brushed down her horse. She masked her disquiet and greeted Katherine with a half-hearted hello resolving to tell her about Father Cleary later.

"You'll never believe it. I think I've mastered the art of making scones." Katherine attempted to dust the flour off the front of her habit. "Mind you, I did use a bit more flour than I thought I would in the process, so I may have to buy some more. You finish up and I'll pour us a cool drink, and you can tell me what you think. By the way, did you get everything done in town you wanted to? No need to answer now, there'll be plenty of time over that drink."

Catriona knew she was being distant and unrightly so. She resolved to be more approachable when she went inside. After locking the gate to the horse yard, she sighed in resignation and walked to the house.

KATHERINE CONTINUED TO dust the front of her habit and she turned toward the house. When she had approached Catriona, she'd sensed her preoccupation, knowing that when she was distant like this it was easier to give her some time--if she wanted to speak about what was on her mind, she would.

A few moments later, Catriona dusted off her shoes and entered through the back door. "Should I get the hammer and chisel for this batch or is dynamite more appropriate?" She sat at the table and smiled.

"Oh, ye of little faith. Never again will you use these as cannon balls. For I believe I've truly mastered the art of scone making." Katherine reverently held up one of the pastries. "Today scones, tomorrow sponges! Try one. How was your trip, is there any news to speak of?"

"Please, one thing at a time. I must concentrate on the official tasting of this manna." Catriona took a bite. "I'm surprised. These are edible. They're not Town Fair standards by any means, but more than adequate for entertaining at home." She dodged a mock blow from Katherine. "And just in time too. Your use of flour was getting costly. Mind you, Susan's happy for the business," she added with a twinkle in her eye.

"Miss Pelham, you're a most ungracious host. How long has it been since you've made scones?" Katherine jokingly asked. "So, how was town, still there?"

Catriona nodded. "I had lunch with Susan, and we spoke about some future issues which may need addressing. I've also invited her for dinner. She'll let me know when she and Me Lin can come out."

"Who is Me Lin? Is she new in town? I don't recall meeting her."

"Me Lin shares the store with Susan. She's the laundress and the lady who made your cotton habits. She's Chinese and keeps to herself, and that's why you mightn't have seen her. While her race bothers neither Susan nor me, the town isn't as accepting of her presence." Catriona's nostrils flared. "Mind you, they're happy for her to do their laundry and mend their clothes but not happy enough to invite her into their homes."

"I don't think I've ever met a Chinese person." Katherine was frustrated but not surprised by the prejudices of the town. "Where did Me Lin and Susan meet? Did she come from the gold fields?"

"Yes. Me Lin lost her husband during a riot by the white men who felt the Chinese were making more money than they were. Their response was to stop them any way they could. Such occurrences weren't unusual, and unfortunately the apathy and the lack of constabulary meant incidents like that went unpunished. After Me Lin's husband's death, Susan insisted that she and her husband employ Me Lin as a laundress and seamstress. If they hadn't then Me Lin's only other form of employment would've involved selling her body to the town drunks."

"When Susan's husband died, she left the gold fields and Me Lin went with her. She's maintained a low profile within the town. In doing so, the town has left her to her own devices." Catriona reached for another scone and the jam. "The arrangement is far from ideal, but suits both Susan and Me Lin."

"We must indeed have them out to dinner. I haven't been to a dinner party for such a long time. As a nun, I suppose I shouldn't say such things. But there *are* some elements of my previous life I miss. How will the two of us manage such an affair? I don't mean to be rude, Catriona, but your steak and eggs is hardly appropriate fare for a dinner party. And my scones certainly won't make a suitable dessert."

"Everything will be fine. When Alexander and I entertain, we usually call on the services of Mrs. Johnston. You must have met her by now."

Katherine nodded.

"She's more than happy to help us on such occasions, in exchange for the help Alexander and I give her family." She bit her bottom lip. "Enough of dinner parties. I ran into another person while I was in town. He's keen to see you and will be visiting tomorrow at eleven o'clock."

Katherine didn't need Catriona to spell out the name of her visitor for, as a nun, there could be only one man calling on her. A thousand questions rushed into her mind. "Father Cleary has returned? Did he say anything to you? Was he disturbed by my actions on my arrival? Is he happy with my work so far?"

"Hang on! I said I bumped into him. I didn't interrogate the man. He came into Susan's store when I was on my way out. He said not much more than how keen he is to meet the new sister. He also mentioned he'd be visiting the ladies' committee prior to his visit." Catriona softly grasped Katherine's forearm. "Don't worry. You've done nothing wrong. Why wouldn't he be satisfied with what you've done to date? If you start worrying now, you'll be a nervous wreck by the time he gets here tomorrow."

"I suppose you're right." Katherine nervously bit her nail. "I wish I knew what his visit with Mrs. Greystone and her committee will involve. You'll be here during his visit won't you?"

Catriona gulped. "I'm afraid I won't be. I've got work out at the Johnston farm. They're expecting me to help them with their muster. If I'm to convince Mrs Johnston to cook for us in the near future it's only right I be there tomorrow. You'll be fine. I'll be home in time for dinner. And if you're not here then I know the father has dragged you off to more appropriate lodgings."

Katherine's face drained of all colour.

Catriona held up her hands. "I was only joking. He's not likely to do that." She picked up her plate and glass and placed them in the big washbasin on the bench. "It might be a good idea if you turn your thoughts to something other than his visit. Why don't you help me in the yard?"

There's some hay I want to move, and I could do with the extra pair of hands. How about we clear this feast and make a move before it gets too dark."

Katherine nodded, but her mind still lingered on Father Cleary's visit. Catriona was right. There wasn't much she could do, and worrying would only make it worse. She followed Catriona out of the kitchen while she attempted to focus her thoughts on other matters, something which proved easier said than done.

Chapter Eight

KATHERINE WOKE THE next morning to what she fondly referred to as nature's alarm clock, as the native birds outside her window signalled their presence. She wondered what the nuns in Ireland would make of such a wake-up. She firmly believed the birds were better than the ringing bells which echoed up and down cold convent corridors in the wee hours of the morning.

Listening to the birdsong, she spread her limbs to their furthest extremities on the bed. She didn't miss the wooden cots of the convent, and who knew what she would have been sleeping in if she'd been forced to live with one of the ladies' committee. She was sure it may have been materially as nice, but the company would have been very different. Katherine enjoyed having someone to come home to, whom she could relate to and share her day's activities. Katherine sat bolt upright. Today she would finally meet Father Cleary. Had she done everything she was supposed to do? Would he be happy with her work? She slapped her hand down on the bed. "For heaven's sake, stop panicking."

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and got up, padded across the floor, and poured water into her basin. She took off her nightgown. Placing her garment on the bed she turned, her body reflected in the room's mirror. She cast a critical eye over herself, tentatively placing her hands on her slightly rounded stomach which bore testimony to her enjoyment of country life, possibly a little more than what she expected. Her hands trailed up her body, coming to rest on her breasts. These hadn't been affected by her extra weight gain and were still the same full size. Not that it mattered. She knew they'd never serve their intended purpose and would maintain their shape and firmness. Katherine's face burned at her blatant vanity. Inwardly shameful, she realised it had also been over a week since she'd last read her morning passage. In fact, without the presence of her habit or the father's presence, Katherine felt she could easily be mistaken for no more than a Good Samaritan calling on the people of the town. She made a silent promise to remember her calling. Dropping her hands to her sides, she returned to her morning ablutions.

CATRIONA BUSIED HERSELF with the mounting list of the accounts requiring payment and her calculations of the extra help needed for the wheat harvest. Despite the pain Alexander's

return promised, she needed him to return soon. Decisions had to be made on the crops to be planted for the next season.

She looked up when the study door opened. Katherine wore one of the cotton habits Me Lin had made. Katherine's demeanour was akin to someone about to meet her maker. Catriona fought to contain the barely restrained laughter bubbling in her throat. "Good morning. I think you need to remember something about your meeting this morning. The Spanish Inquisition has been over for years."

The scowl on Katherine's face disappeared, replaced by a crooked smile. "It's easy for you to say. I feel like a novice meeting the Mother Superior for some misdemeanour I've committed. You've obviously never been a nun. But didn't you ever feel reluctant about being chastised by your governesses when you were a girl?"

Catriona's smile was inscrutable. "I suppose it depends on which governess you're referring to." She thought back to her time with Adele who had never needed to chastise Catriona. "I can understand your predicament. I've these accounts to finish, and then I'll be out until mid-afternoon. That should give you time enough to expunge your sins to Father Cleary." She looked at the storm clouding Katherine's features. "Oh, bloody hell, I'm only joking!"

"Sometimes you can be so frustrating," Katherine said in clipped tones. "I wonder whether you fully appreciate the gravity of this meeting! He may not be at all satisfied with my work, or what I did to the bodies on the day of the storm. He may not be happy about the current arrangement of me boarding with you, given your family's record with nuns to date." Katherine put her hands to her mouth to attempt to halt her tirade.

The air noticeably chilled, as if Coreen was in the room. Catriona carefully rose from her chair. She shuffled her papers into a neat pile, placed them in the top drawer of the desk and locked it.

Catriona looked down to find Katherine gently grasping her elbow.

"Catriona, I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said. My words were cruel and harsh, and I should have never used them. I allowed my prideful anger to get the best of me. My actions were unfair to you and were definitely not fair to a woman who isn't here to defend herself."

She deliberately removed Katherine's hand and steadily walked toward the door, not once turning around. "I'll pretend you never said what you just did, and we'll speak no more on it. I'm going outside to saddle my horse. I hope your meeting with Father Cleary goes well." She closed the door behind her.

Catriona's clinical response struck Katherine more deeply than any emotional outburst could have done. She made no immediate move to follow her, feeling as if she'd been dismissed like a foolish, wilful child. Regretting her outburst was one thing, but regaining Catriona's complete friendship would be another. She only hoped her meeting with the father would be a lot easier. Nervously smoothing the front of her habit, she made her way out of the study.

ALTHOUGH BUSY PREPARING for the father's visit, Katherine's mind continually returned to the words she'd said in anger. How could she be so callous? And the look on Catriona's face. Katherine cringed. She only hoped she could mend her bridges when she came home.

Attempting to keep her thoughts from dwelling any further on the incident, Katherine prepared the parlour by opening the curtains and windows to let some air into a room. She coughed at the dust created by the movement of the curtains. "This room obviously doesn't see a lot of use." The room was modest in size, dominated by Australian cedar furniture, an upright piano, and a watercolour landscape above the fireplace. The simplicity complemented the room. It was nothing like the dark and cluttered Victorian-style rooms of the ladies' committee. The furnishings of Gleneagle were down-to-earth, yet Katherine liked their homeliness---they fitted in so well. She'd barely finished her ministrations when the unmistakable clip of a horse's hooves filtered through the open window. She peered out, in time to see Father Cleary pull his carriage to a halt directly in front of the house. She stepped back, concealing herself in the room's shadows, and surreptitiously viewed him while he fixed a nosebag to the horse.

He wasn't overly big and, unlike the rather rotund church fathers she had been used to in Ireland, Father Cleary possessed a wiry build. His face, like the stationmaster's, had begun its process of physical erosion. When he turned toward the house, Katherine hastened into the hallway. She checked her habit and opened the door.

"Good morning. I'm Father Angus Cleary, and I believe you're Sister Katherine Flynn." He took her hand. "Welcome to Australia, Sister. Do you mind if I come in?"

Katherine stepped out of the doorway. "I'm sorry, Father, where are my manners? Thank you for your words of welcome." With the sensation of butterflies fluttering in her stomach, Katherine took his hat and motioned him toward the parlour. "I must say, it's truly a remarkable country, full of many extremes, which I'm sure you're more than aware of. Of course, the climate is so much warmer than Ireland."

"I've never seen England or Ireland, so I'll have to take your word for it. I did all my theological studies at the seminary in Sydney. Mind you, the previous sisters all remarked on the change of weather. Some dealt with it better than others and I'm happy to see you've realised the conventionality of wearing cotton rather than wool. I'm sure it's much more comfortable." Father Cleary sat and reassuringly smiled. "Wool might be beneficial come winter, but definitely not during any of the other seasons of the year."

"Actually, Catriona, er, Miss Pelham suggested I wear cotton. I don't know how long I would have lasted on my visits to the district's families in my hot woollen habits."

"Yes, Miss Pelham is an eminently sensible young woman. Sometimes too sensible," he uttered and cleared his throat. "If I can add one more suggestion--get rid of your infernal veil and wimple and find yourself a hat to protect yourself from the sun." Father Cleary flexed his hands

in front of him. "I'd hate to send you back to Ireland at the end of your tenure with your face looking like mine."

Katherine nodded and inwardly laughed. She couldn't wait to see the look on Catriona's face. She probably knew all along that she'd win the battle of wills.

Katherine looked at Father Cleary's expectant face. "I'm sure there are a number of things you wish to discuss but firstly, would you like some tea and refreshments?"

"The Lord be praised!" Father Cleary rubbed his hands together. "I thought you were *never* going to ask. I always find my trips have a tendency for me to work up a thirst."

"If you'd like to make yourself comfortable. I'll only be a few minutes."

Katherine soon returned with tea and the batch of scones she'd made yesterday. She put the tray on the occasional table in front of them, thanking the powers above that she'd had the time to practice her scone-making on Catriona. She would've hated to give him food poisoning because of her lack of cooking skills.

Placing a scone on his plate, he sat forward. "So Sister, I hear you had an unconventional introduction to the town. From what I've been told, you nearly died at the train station only to sufficiently recover enough to tend to those of the town who were in need."

Masking her embarrassment, Katherine poured tea for them both. "I believe someone's been, as Australian's say, pulling your leg. I'd only fallen asleep at the station. Despite the tragedy of the storm, I'm sure sooner or later someone would have remembered my arrival, as they eventually did. As for my actions, believe me, I would *never* have shriven the dead if you were here. However, in your absence, no one else could do it. It did give the families who had lost a loved one some comfort. And I did assure them you'd visit them on your return."

Father Cleary held up his hand. "Sister, don't mistake my comment. Your decision to provide comfort to these people was the right one, and I appreciate what you did. In the next week or so, I'll conduct a memorial service to put to rest any doubts the families may have regarding their lost loved ones." Father Cleary smiled. "Rest assured--what you did was correct given the circumstances."

Katherine felt ashamed at accepting the credit for something she'd been virtually forced into by Catriona. Had it been up to her she would have done the exact opposite. This made her feel even more guilt over her earlier outburst with Catriona. She wondered why she had to be so prideful sometimes.

"Apparently you've been very busy working with the less fortunate families around the district. I hear you've made a significant impression with them. I have to say the sisters we've had here in the past, less Sister Coreen may she rest in peace, found it very difficult to find their niche."

"I have no doubt that Sister Coreen's good work made it very easy for me to be accepted."

"All the same, I'm glad you like working with the families. You'll find it will occupy a great deal of your time. One of the requirements I ask of the sisters here is that they have a modicum of knowledge on the treatment of minor ailments and the like. Our closest doctor is in the next town. Even though our town has the new modern telegraph, it still takes half a day's hard ride to get here from there." He buttered another scone. "Were you given any medical instruction by your convent?"

"I was, but only for rudimentary injuries. This training has been supplemented by Miss Pelham, who has given me advice on the treatment of heat sickness and snakebite. I wasn't familiar with either of these." Katherine took a sip of tea. "I'm grateful you're happy with my work. It's certainly a delight to get around and talk with parishioners, especially the children. Speaking of which, I hope you don't mind, but I've sent for some children's books to assist in their learning. It's unfair they don't have access to readings more suited to their age group." Her eyes shone. "I do love working with the children. It fills me with a sense of worth."

"Someone told me about your book venture, and I must say it's a wonderful idea. The children's literacy and numeracy has been an ongoing concern of mine. I have never been able to find enough hours in the day to remedy the problem. I've always thought the children out here grow up way too fast, with the responsibility of adulthood being thrust on them before they barely reach their teens. Such a cycle is repetitive and must be broken. I believe your endeavours may well achieve that."

Katherine felt the tension leave her shoulders. "Thank you, Father. I've managed to incorporate my teaching with their farming tasks so as to not make their parents suspicious of their learning. From what I can gather, it's working out for all concerned."

"By the way, Mrs. Crosier asked me to mention to you she's not yet seen your shipment. Father Cleary fell silent as he searched the room, his fingers tapping the arm of his chair. He took a deep breath and returned his focus to Katherine. "I must mention a meeting I had with the ladies' committee this morning. Let me say I'm not always comfortable with their discussions. You must understand though, I primarily rely on the more affluent district families to assist me in my Ministry. Therefore, when they raise a concern I'm obliged to pursue the matter."

Katherine felt the tension seeping back into her body.

"Mrs. Greystone is beside herself with worry over you living so far from town. She, er, feels you'd be much better suited by staying with one of the committee families." He held up his hand. "Before you answer, I've no doubt by now Miss Pelham has discussed with you the situation involving her brother and Sister Watson. I'm sure you're not surprised to learn it caused a great deal of discourse among the town gossips." He crossed and uncrossed his legs. "Mrs. Greystone's main concern is Miss Pelham's influence and her," he nervously swallowed, "rather unorthodox ways. She told me about the rude manner in which Miss Pelham addressed you after your return from your, er, bushranging adventure. She said Miss Pelham's actions bordered on physical violence. Is this correct?"

Katherine was no fool. She knew the ladies would grasp at any opportunity presented to them to extract her from her current accommodation, even though she'd made it politely clear to them where she prefer to live. Why did they persist in getting yet another obviously reluctant person involved in their petty imbroglios? She cursed herself and Catriona for allowing themselves to become embroiled in such a public disagreement on the morning of her return from the bushrangers.

Katherine tamped down her anger. "I'm sorry Mrs. Greystone has seen fit to mention this to you, for it has placed you in a somewhat invidious position. Miss Pelham's disagreement with me that morning was warranted. She, in looking after my safety, advised me to wait with the Connors' so she could escort me home. My pride is what's at fault, not Miss Pelham. Had I waited, she would've had no cause to get as irate as she did. I can't say I blame her.

"As for Mrs. Greystone, I've already politely declined her offer for practical reasons. It is easier for me to administer care to the less fortunate families from out here. They're more accessible to me, and what's even more important is *my* accessibility to them. The families who see me need to do so free of any incumbencies arising from me residing in town. Pardon my frankness, but I can't see the more eminent families being too receptive to those not of their station, once they started arriving on their doorstep at all hours of the day. If I resided in such a home then many of the poorer families would be unlikely to approach me, and this would defeat the purpose of my work." Cheeks flushed, Katherine fought to control her temper. She unclenched her hands and flattened her palms on her legs. "Mrs. Greystone also warned me of the unorthodox ways of Miss Pelham, with whom I've discussed the matter. She doesn't dress the way a woman should. Given her work on the land, a dress would be no more suitable than my woollen attire in summer. I'm also aware she currently doesn't have, or hasn't had in the immediate past, any male suitors. When you consider all the work she does in a day, there's hardly any time left for entertaining. Father, if I may be so bold to suggest, choices for a woman of her standing, in the immediate district, are rather limited. She told me she did have a suitor when she was seventeen. Unfortunately the match wasn't approved by her family because of the age difference. I believe she's most likely never recovered from this and would be naturally reluctant to seek out another suitor." She stopped at the look on Father Cleary's face.

Father Cleary gripped the edge of his chair. He leant forward and his piercing grey eyes searched her face. "I recall having to speak with her, at her mother's request, when she was that age. Did she ever mention the suitor's name?"

Something isn't quite right here, Katherine thought. "No, she hasn't. And, given the sensitivity of the subject, I don't believe it's prudent for me to pursue the matter. Father, I know this puts you in a rather delicate situation. Under the circumstances, I'd sincerely appreciate your assistance in allowing me to stay here. Rest assured, I'm not likely to wear trousers, and I promise I'll maintain regular visits with the more affluent families."

Father Cleary rose from his chair and walked to the fireplace. He softly fingered the frame of the watercolour which hung above the mantelpiece. "Where do her interests lie," he muttered.

Katherine barely caught his words. "I'm sorry Father, did you say something?"

He shook his head and turned. "You're right. It *is* difficult for me to be caught in such a situation. I admit I am not entirely comfortable in being employed as a pawn in the machinations of the ladies' committee. Besides, I've only minor authority over your presence here, beyond the role of a father to a sister. I'll speak to the ladies and explain to them it would be better that the," he held his hands up, as if to indicate quotation marks, "dirty and disease-ridden families visit you out here, rather than have you drag them into their sitting rooms."

He lowered his eyes then returned his gaze to Katherine. "As for Miss Pelham's unorthodox ways, I'm aware she's, er, different. If I feel the influence she's having on you is detrimental to your calling, then I *will* see to your relocation closer to the main part of town." Father Cleary's foreboding tone was not lost on her.

Katherine rose and grasped his hand. "Thank you, Father. I won't let you down. I feel there's so much I can do out here, both through your guidance and with some ideas I have of my own. I feel Miss Pelham, with her lack of female confidants, may benefit from my presence. You never know, it may serve to soften her a bit." Katherine was relieved she'd faced the last hurdle and overcome it. She couldn't wait to tell Catriona about her success. Her first duty though, would be to apologise for her unseemly behaviour.

Father Cleary made no effort to sit down. Instead, he retrieved his hat from the table beside the door and placed it on his head. "Enough of the morning's pleasantries. I've families to visit. I think you and I should meet on a weekly basis when I'm in town. You may reach me at the Percy's accommodation hotel. Please give Miss Pelham my regards." He opened the door to the hallway, paused, and again looked at the watercolour hanging over the fireplace. "One more thing before I go. When you next speak to Miss Pelham, you may wish to ask her about the watercolour." He motioned to the one in question.

Katherine nodded and she skirted around Father Cleary and opened the front door for him. "I will. I look forward to speaking with you again, Father. And, thank you once again for volunteering to explain my situation to the ladies' committee."

Father Cleary climbed onto his carriage and grasped the reins. "Thank you for the scones, Sister Flynn. They were delicious." Turning the horse's head, he pulled away.

Katherine waited until the wagon was almost at the end of the path to the front gate before going inside. She closed the parlour windows and drew the heavy drapes, effectively curtailing the advent of any more flies or the oncoming heat of the day penetrating the room. She picked up the serving tray and headed for the kitchen.

Heating the water to clean the morning's dishes, she couldn't help but feel at last she had somewhere she could stay. Despite the difficulties Father Cleary would face, she was sure he'd be successful in convincing the committee. She was hopeful, despite her rudeness, Catriona would be happy to have her stay.

Katherine paused in her motion of pouring water into the washbasin, her mind on Catriona. Had the protestations she'd made this morning solely revolved around her necessity to tend to the

families of the district? Was it the families, or was it also the fact that, for once, she had a good friend, someone close to her own age, in whom she could confide? She wondered if the relationship Susan and Me Lin shared was as strong as the one she and Catriona were developing. She was quietly excited at the prospect of having them to dinner. It would allow her the opportunity to relive such occasions which, since becoming a nun, were a lifetime ago. Shaking herself out of her mood, she returned to the dishes.

Katherine spent the rest of the afternoon doing minor cleaning around the house and preparing vegetables for tea. With the vegetables completed, Katherine decided, given Catriona's mustering activities of the day, there was all likelihood that one of the first things she'd do on her return would be to have a bath. Out back, she grasped the high edge of the bath with both hands and dragged it slowly toward the kitchen door. She'd almost completed her task when she heard the sound of hooves heading up the driveway. She straightened up, went to the end of the verandah, and looked down the road, toward the entrance to the property.

Through the brightness of the afternoon sun, she saw a person on a horse. Catriona said she'd be home around this time. She raised her hand in a greeting, which was acknowledged. She returned to her task of dragging the bath into the kitchen.

She'd barely finished when she heard the horse come to a halt, followed by quick footfalls on the verandah. Straightening and bracing herself for the apology she knew was hers to give, she turned. When the back door opened, she stepped back and grasped a chair.

The man at the door hesitated, checking the broad smile on his face for a more contained one.

Katherine, having managed to master her emotions, introduced herself. "How do you do? My name is Sister Katherine Flynn. And there's no other person you could be than Mr. Pelham." Katherine nervously smiled. "You bear a striking resemblance to your sister. But I'm sure you've been told this many times."

Alexander strode across the kitchen, his hand extended. "I have, Sister. Do you think you could call me Alexander? Mr. Pelham makes me sound older than my years. I expect Catriona has told you I've been away for the past few months." Katherine mutely nodded. "I presume Cat has made you welcome, despite her sometimes abrasive nature. Please excuse me, but I must see to my horse and then wash up outside. I've been away for so long, but I'd like to talk to you about issues I'm sure you've been made aware of." Alexander looked down at Katherine with sky blue eyes which obviously ran in the family. He frowned and stepped back, seemingly conscious of how close he'd been standing. He nodded and then strode out the door.

Katherine's shoulders slumped in relief. She could now understand why Sister Coreen had fallen for such a man. He was just like his sister. Taller perhaps, but the two could be twins. And those piercing blue eyes--almost the same as hers. Katherine smiled when she thought of the times she'd looked into Catriona's sometimes happy, sometimes angry deep blue eyes. It occurred to her that if eyes actually did mirror one's deepest secrets, she was yet to discover the secrets Catriona so capably concealed.

Katherine started at the sound of the barn door being opened. Realising Alexander might be both hungry and thirsty, she headed for the pantry to prepare him lunch.

She halted in her tracks and raised her hand to her mouth in horror. He said he wanted to speak with her. She expected it would be about Sister Coreen. Given the way he came bounding through the door, she doubted that he could possibly know what had happened to her. She anxiously looked out the window at the barn and then toward the parlour. Why did Father Cleary leave so soon? *Where* was Catriona? How long could she avoid answering his questions? Katherine's range of social discussion skills were woefully out of practice. "At least I can prolong matters by preparing him lunch." She reached into the meat safe and retrieved a leg of ham. "I hope he takes as much care and time brushing down his horse as Catriona does."

Katherine kept one eye on the barn while simultaneously wishing for the sound of hooves heralding Catriona's return. Thankfully Alexander took half an hour to see to his horse. She surreptitiously studied him at the outside water pump. Stripping down to the waist, he hummed a tune while he washed the accumulated dirt from his body. Katherine's mouth dropped when he headed toward the house half-naked. In almost synchronisation to her reaction, he stopped and returned to the barn. He exited the wooden building, pulling on a clean shirt as he came.

As he came inside, she said, "Alexander, I'm sorry for my reaction earlier. I was shocked to see someone new at the house. Mind you, Catriona said she was expecting your return. I believe she's left some papers in the top drawer of the desk in the study for you to review. Before you busy yourself with those, I'm sure you're hungry." While he sat, she placed enough food for three men in front of him.

He opened his mouth, but Katherine interrupted. "There's no need to thank me. It's the least I can do, given you and your sister's generosity. I'd also be grateful if you'd call me Katherine. Catriona has taught me sometimes formality isn't required this far out in the country. It would be foolish for me to call you Alexander while having you call me Sister all the time." Katherine knew she was rambling, but she was willing to say anything to avoid his questions. "I'll leave you to your lunch. I have some religious reading and passages to prepare for the children of the district."

Alexander, who was halfway through a sandwich endeavoured to swallow as if to pose a question.

Katherine held up her hand. "Please excuse me. I'm sure there'll be more than ample time to talk later this evening. For now I'll leave you to finish your lunch." Katherine turned and left for her room.

Katherine released a shaky breath and she leant against the wall of her closed bedroom door. Convinced Alexander wouldn't follow, she paced, her hands nervously clasped in front of her. She paused only long enough to look out the window, willing the figure of Catriona and horse to appear. I hope she returns soon. I can't stay in here forever or Alexander will know something's wrong.

Realising the sound her leather-heeled shoes were making, she tiptoed to her bedroom dresser and opened the drawer containing her Bible. She sat and tried to focus on reading, for the sake of taking her mind off everything. She dropped the book onto the dresser and again walked to the window. The view was no different from the last time she checked. Unable to concentrate, she lay down. Maybe spiritual meditation with help. She focused on relaxing her breathing.

KATHERINE SUDDENLY AWOKE at the footfall of a horse. She flung herself off the bed, opened the French windows to her room, and ran outside. At last, she thought. Oh Lord, I hope Alexander didn't hear anything.

Catriona tethered her horse and removed her saddlebags. Katherine ran toward her. Arriving out of breath and gulping in air, she was lost for words.

Catriona, looking tired from a day's hard riding, didn't turn from the task of unsaddling her horse. "It's been a long day, Katherine. Whatever it is it can wait. Right now, all I want is a hot bath and bed. No arguments please, just let me..."

She turned and paused mid-sentence. Catriona strode forward and grabbed Katherine's arms. "What is it? Has the father ordered you into town? You need to know he doesn't have the direct authority to do it." Catriona released Katherine and retightened the saddle girth. "I'm going in to town. This time he's gone too far."

Catriona's apprehension deeply touched Katherine. Despite the harsh words spoken earlier, Catriona obviously still cared for her welfare. Katherine grabbed the girth. "It isn't that. It's much worse. Alexander's returned. I've managed to stall him by avoiding him. He's in the study." Katherine looked into Catriona's eyes. "And very happy. This would lead me to believe no one's told him about Sister Coreen."

Catriona closed her eyes and bent her head as if collecting herself. She handed the reins to Katherine. "Then I expect it's up to me to break the news. I'd ask you make yourself scarce, for I'm not sure what his reaction will be. If I need you, I'll call."

Chapter Nine

CATRIONA ENTERED THE back entrance of the house and collected herself. She knew today would eventually come. In truth, she hadn't fully prepared herself for it. Katherine's arrival, coupled with her own work on the farm and the surrounding district hadn't given her the time to sit down and think about how she'd break the news to Alexander.

She closed her eyes in pain. She'd never seen him as happy as when he was with Coreen. Now she was about to tell him something that would emotionally rend him in two. All at once she felt very old for her twenty-eight years. She longed, just once, to have someone else bear the responsibilities thrust upon her. She reluctantly walked along the corridor to the study where Alexander was. Steeling herself, she grasped the handle and quietly opened the door.

Alexander jolted awake. He rubbed his face and scanned the room, as if to gain his bearings and his gaze settled on Catriona. Shaking himself out of his sleepiness, he rose from the leather chair and encircled her in his arms. "Hello, Cat, you look like you've been wrestling cattle again. Should I bother asking who won?"

Catriona carefully returned Alexander's hug. "Why bother. A Pelham always succeeds at what ever enterprise they begin." Catriona's breath hitched, realising Alexander's most recent endeavour would be one met with bitter success. Her eyes guarded, she attempted to keep the conversation between them neutral. "Welcome home. How are you? What stories of the world have you brought with you this time?"

Alexander grabbed her hand and led her to the two chairs next to the fireplace. He eased himself into the comfort of one chair, motioning her to do the same. "The price of wheat has picked up a bit but not half as much as barley has. The men I spoke with told me, as far as crops go, barley isn't easy to grow, but has significant financial benefits. I think next year we'll sow a paddock to see if it'll take. If it does then, my dear Cat," he locked his hands behind his head, a smug look on his face, "I think we'll be well established as one of the most affluent families in the west."

"Not that we truly need it, Alex," Catriona gently remonstrated. "We're *more* than economically self-sufficient here. There're a lot of people in far worse situations than we are."

"I know. Although don't you think it would be nice to well and truly rub it in the faces of those rich impostors? I'm sick to death of their condescending looks every time we go into town." Alexander failed to keep the bitterness from his voice. "I want this property to be one of the most modern properties in the district. With the returns I envision, no one would *dare* treat us like squatters." He closed his eyes and exhaled, attempting to bring his frustration under control. "What's been happening around here?"

Catriona gulped, not yet ready to raise the topic of Coreen. She stood and walked to the liquor cabinet. "Before I begin, would you like a drink? I've been riding all day and need something to quench my thirst. How about a whisky and water?" Not waiting for his reply, she poured a generous helping of scotch into a glass.

Alexander raised his brows. "I don't believe my ears! You drinking alcohol is surprising enough, but before sunset? You *must* have had a hard day. Of course I'll join you. Then you can tell me what's happened while I've been away."

"I'll get us some water and then we can sit down and have a good old talk." She closed the door and went to the kitchen where Katherine was seated.

"How's everything going in there?" Katherine asked, a concerned look on her face.

Catriona busied herself with filling a crystal water jug from the pitcher on the bench top. "Everything's fine so far. Then again I haven't told him anything yet. I think it's going to be a long night. So please don't wait dinner for us." Catriona replaced the pitcher on the bench. "I intend to get him slightly drunk, at least enough so once I tell him about Coreen, hopefully the pain won't be too great."

Katherine moved to Catriona's side and placed her hand over Catriona's. Catriona's gaze alternated between Katherine's hand and her face, which was perilously close to her own.

"Remember, if you need me I'm here," Katherine softly said.

Catriona looked deeply into Katherine's eyes, too moved to transfer into words what she felt. This morning she'd been so angry with her. But how could she remain angry with someone so beautiful? Setting the crystal jug on the table, she placed her other hand over both of theirs and wistfully smiled. "I," Catriona flinched at the sound of a cough coming from the direction of the study. "I'm sorry. I better go." She half-heartedly removed her hand, picked up the jug, and returned to the study.

She found Alexander had already helped himself. "Do you want some water?"

He held out his glass. "I won't say no."

She barely poured a dash of water into his glass. "Let me fix mine and I'll be right with you." Catriona poured a scant amount of whisky into her glass, filling the rest to barely below the brim with water. She sat opposite Alexander, took a hearty sip and placed her tumbler on one of the occasional tables. She opened her mouth to commence her sanitised version of what had passed during his absence but was cut off.

"By the way, I met the new sister this afternoon-- Katherine, I think she said her name was. She seems very nervous. She rambled on at quite a pace and was very reluctant to be alone with me. I think I surprised her with my sudden arrival. What do you think of her? Is she always so on edge?"

Catriona mulled over his question. She could hardly tell him her feelings for Katherine raged between the impetuosity of love, strongly tempered by the sensibility of friendship. "She's not usually so jumpy. In fact, she's a stubborn and proud woman."

Alexander threw his head back and laughed.

"Then you two should get on famously. Why, once winter gets here, with your combined stubborn pride, there may not be any need to light a fire in the house. So, how many disagreements have you had so far?" Alexander smiled. "Why Cat, I do believe you're blushing."

"I'm not the only one in the family with *pride*," Catriona deflected. "Who do you think *I* got it from?" The two shared a laugh. "As for Katherine, we've had our disagreements. We still share a lot of common ground though. She has a desire to help the less fortunate families of the district, and she's been doing very well." Catriona took a sip from her watered-down scotch. "They've very much accepted her."

Alexander snorted. "I didn't think I'd live to see the day when you said you had so much in common with a nun. There must have been changes around here since I was gone," he said good-naturedly. "What else has happened?"

Catriona tried to marshal her thoughts. Rather than commence from when Alexander left, she elected to work backward. Hopefully this would buy her the time she needed to find the words to explain what had happened.

He contentedly listened to the occurrences of the town, occasionally stopping and asking her to expand on some minor point or another. She told him about the first visit Katherine had made to the ladies of the district, and Mrs. Greystone's reaction to Catriona escorting her to the front of her house.

Alexander grinned. "You can't help yourself, can you? You've always taken great delight in upsetting that fossil."

"If I didn't carry on so, then what would she and her old cronies talk about? There's hardly any other excitement out here and, besides," Catriona added, a cheeky gleam in her eye and a smile on her mouth, "she deserves it."

Her smile sobered when she realised she'd arrived at the day of Katherine's arrival and the dust storm. She swallowed the remains of her drink and rose to make another. She picked up Alexander's empty glass and refilled it, again with a greater portion of whisky than water.

Alexander frowned as he took his glass.

"Things must have changed, Cat." He accepted the crystal tumbler from her and cradled it in his hands. "Two whisky's in such quick succession. I don't think I've ever seen you drink so much, except when you allow things to get to you. As I remember, the last time you consumed too much I ended up having to carry you to bed. Of course, all you did the next day was vow and declare you'd never touch another drop. Don't tell me the new sister is driving you to it."

Catriona looked away, innately aware of how easy Alexander could read her. "It's not like that. I thought it would be nice for us to share one together. We very rarely get the chance, what with you touring the country all the time and me stuck here."

Alexander's brows furrowed and he rubbed his chin. He leant forward in his chair, locking Catriona's eyes with his own. "You're hiding something, Cat. What's the matter? Have those old witches in town upset you with their gossip? I've told you to ignore them. Their cruel talk isn't worthy of a response from you."

Catriona looked down at her hands and shook her head.

"You're scaring me. What's wrong?"

Catriona put down her drink and leant forward, so Alexander's face was inches apart from hers. "For once it's got nothing to do with them." She slowly blinked and exhaled. "Alex, not long after you left, the town was hit by a dust storm, much bigger than any we've had in the last fifteen years. This one caused untold devastation. I gather you didn't return through town on your journey home?" He shook his head. "Then you won't know what it did to the place. Most of the shops made of wood were blown apart." At his look of concern, she took another drink.

"At the height of the gale a number of people sought refuge in the Town Hall. So much debris was blown about in the street it was a natural place for everyone to go. The Town Hall collapsed." Her voice wavered. "Most of the people inside it were killed."

A slight twitch formed below Alexander's eye. He looked away, rose, and walked to the windows, hands thrust into his pockets, back turned to her. "I'm terribly sorry it happened. If there's anything we can do for the people who've suffered, that you haven't already done, then we will." Alexander turned and stared intently at Catriona. "Cat, where's Coreen?"

Catriona tried to speak but the words wouldn't come. Silent tears fell down her cheeks. Alexander crossed the room and knelt in front of her. He held her arms with his hands and looked steadily at her. "Catriona, where's Coreen?"

She lowered her face to regain her composure, but without success. She raised her head. "She's gone," she managed, her voice barely above a whisper.

Alexander's face ran the gamut of emotions from disbelief to anger. "What do you mean she's gone? Please tell me she's left. Say that the sister out there convinced her to return to Sydney. I can be packed in the hour and ready to follow her." He desperately searched her face. "You see Cat, I've wonderful news. I've found someone who'll marry us."

To prolong the inevitable would only make it worse. She gently removed his hands from her arms and firmly held on to them. "You don't know how much I wish I could say she's merely left here. But it's not true." Alexander's face resembled a child's who suspected his Christmas was about to be ruined. "She was in the Town Hall on the day of the dust storm. I'm sorry, Alex, she was dead by the time they found her."

Alexander pushed himself away. Unable to steady herself, Catriona fell back into the chair. He silently paced the room like a caged animal. He closed the distance between them, roughly grabbed her, and shook her. "It's not true, you're hiding something. That nun out there has convinced her to return to England. That's it, isn't it? I bet that's why she was sent out here. I won't have it, I tell you! And I won't have her in our house!" Loosening his grip, he wheeled toward the door.

She barely caught his hand in time and held it in a vice-like grip. "It has nothing to do with her!" Maintaining her grip, she calmed her tone. "She's dead, Alexander. You can't imagine how I wish she wasn't, but she is. Katherine arrived on the day of the dust storm. It's not Katherine's fault or any one else's. There's nothing *anyone* could have done to save the people in the hall."

Alexander lost his battle to maintain his composure, and his face puckered up, like a child's does only seconds before they cry. Collapsing to his knees, he noiselessly wept. Catriona followed him to the floor. Unable to offer any words of comfort to ease his pain, she put her arms around him and gently rocked him, as he had done for her the day their parents died. Thinking back on that day, and about Coreen, she too wept.

During the course of the late afternoon and early evening, Catriona managed to move him from his position on the floor and back into one of the chairs. She only left the study twice--on both occasions to get more water for the scotch.

THROUGHOUT THE LATTER part of the day, Katherine tiptoed through the house, listening to the muted sounds of weeping and words coming from behind the closed door of the study. Occasionally she could make out Catriona's emotionally charged and pained voice sharing in Alexander's sorrow. She longed to give her relief from the burden she was bearing.

In an attempt to guide her thoughts elsewhere, she wrote a series of lessons for the Connor children, who she hadn't visited since the incident with the bushrangers. She paused, her mind's eye suddenly filled by the smiling face and challenging words of the enigmatic Mary Carraghan regarding who she lived with.

Lost in her thoughts, she started at Catriona's entrance. Catriona wordlessly refilled the crystal jug and then returned from whence she'd come. Katherine watched her leave, her own emotional awareness heightened. Again the laughter and challenging words of Mary Carraghan pervaded her thoughts: "*Does that not leave you living with a woman? If you weren't a nun, what do you think would be said about you?*"

Despite her attempts to concentrate on her lessons, Mary's words relentlessly circled her mind like carrion to prey, and her thoughts dwelled on her own shocked refusal at the mere mention of such actions between two women. What concerned her more was the unfamiliar emotion Mary had evoked in her, one she also felt with Catriona. Shaking her head, she put down her pencil, placed a lit lamp centrally on the kitchen table, and retired to her room.

CATRIONA DREW THE curtains and raised the wick of the lamp on the occasional table between her and Alexander. She picked up her drink, very much aware she'd dispensed with water for her brother some hours ago. She looked at his red-rimmed eyes. "Do you remember when Coreen first arrived?"

"Like it were only yesterday." He wiped his nose. "She tried to get back in the carriage as the train pulled away from the station. I thought she was going to fall between the tracks." He took a long draught from his drink and searched the room, as if hoping to see her standing there. "I'll never forget that day we were both in the store and she stood her ground with the ladies over their spiteful words about me." He sighed heavily. "That was when I realised I loved her."

Catriona reached across and softly stroked his hand. "She loved you too, with all her heart."

He covered his face in his hands. "Oh Christ, Cat, what am I going to do?"

Catriona's eyes watered and she hugged him. "I don't know, Alex, I just don't know." She shed tears not only for Coreen but for Alexander also. He was more than her brother. He was the best male friend she'd ever had. He never lectured her on her lifestyle. After his initial comments regarding her unmarried state were met with stubborn silence, he had never pressed the issue.

As the shadows lengthened, his voice became more slurred and the pauses between his words increasingly prolonged. Finally the rise and fall of his chest and his closed eyes signaled he was asleep. She shook her head and fought to keep her eyes open. "We better get you into bed." She steadied herself, bent over him, and linked her hands under Alexander's arms.

Six feet of dead weight made it nigh on impossible for her to do any more than move him forward. With a combined day of physical and emotional effort working against her, she gently eased him against the back of the chair.

She straightened and headed for the kitchen. A trimmed lamp cast solemn shadows around the empty room. Catriona glanced at the kitchen clock, only then realising the lateness of the hour.

KATHERINE WAS IN an Irish dreamscape, on a misty early evening in her parent's country garden. The sounds of a string quartet wafted through the open ornate glass doors of her father's house, across the grass to where she danced with a stranger. They danced with a familiarity that could only be borne through close knowledge of each other. Try as she might, she couldn't make out her partner's face. Suddenly a shaft of light fell between them and Katherine realised she was looking at Catriona.

"I'm sorry to wake you, but I need your help."

For a moment Katherine wasn't sure if the face in front of her belonged to her dance partner. "What are you doing here?" she asked, her voice muddled with sleep.

"I'm here because this is my house. Why else would I be here?" Catriona drew the lamp away from Katherine's face and placed it on her bedside table. "I apologise. I didn't mean to sound so harsh," she softly said. "Please, I need your help."

"What time is it?" Katherine rubbed her eyes, shaking herself free from the tendrils of her dream.

"It's past midnight. I've managed to put Alex asleep with the assistance of two decanters of good scotch, but now I can't move him."

By the sounds of her voice, Katherine could tell she'd also consumed her fair share of whisky.

"I'm pretty sure that between us we'll be able to move him from the study to his room."

Katherine pulled back her bedcovers and got out of bed. "Maybe we should prepare his room first." She reached for her slippers and put them on.

"You're right. Can I use your lamp? Mine's just about out of oil, and I'd prefer not to go back in the study to get one of those lamps until we're ready to move him." Catriona reached to pick up the lamp.

"Of course, but maybe you should let me carry that." She looked at Catriona's confused face. "So you can show me where Alexander's room is."

In Alexander's room Katherine lit one of the lamps from her own. Catriona grabbed the edge of the bedspread and pulled it down. "I've managed to remove his belt, to make him a little more comfortable. This'll allow us to lay him fully clothed on the bed. I'll take off his shoes there, and then we can cover him. I don't wish to do anything else, in case he wakes."

Halting in front of the study, Catriona quietly opened the door to check on him. "Thank God, he's still asleep," she whispered. "If you take one side, I'll take the other."

Catriona placed one of Alexander's arms over her shoulder and then held on to his hand. Katherine mirrored her action and they rose as one.

Katherine grunted with the initial effort of lifting him. Despite his height and drunken weight, between them they managed to half-carry, half-drag him down the hall into his room. He woke only briefly before his head again sagged. Katherine was remotely conscious of the ripping of material during their efforts and sensed the hem of her cotton nightgown would be in need of repair in the near future.

They lowered him onto the bed. "I'll go around the other side," Catriona said. "So we can get him closer to the middle."

After concerted pushing and shoving, they finally achieved their task. Katherine straightened and stepped back from the bed. She closed her eyes and placed her hands in the small of her now-aching back.

She heard the sound of his boots dropping to the floor. "I'll just pull these covers over him, Katherine, and then we can both get some sleep."

Katherine nodded, preoccupied with massaging a tender spot at the base of her spine. Suddenly sensing someone in close proximity to her, Katherine opened her eyes. Catriona stood in front of

her, her gaze focused on Katherine's chest. Katherine looked down, only then realising the tearing she'd heard earlier was the front of her nightgown. One side had slipped. One of her breasts was silhouetted in the lamp's light, the curve of it obvious, with the hint of a nipple showing.

CATRIONA COULDN'T DRAG her eyes away from a sight which, aside from her own body, she hadn't seen in such a long time. Sensing something was wrong, she raised her eyes to meet Katherine's stare who, by her look, was very aware of Catriona's gaze. Her features were inscrutable. Yet Catriona sensed no anger, more so an unreadable calm. Ever so slowly, and without breaking eye contact with Catriona, Katherine raised her hand to the torn fabric and pulled it back onto her shoulder.

"I think it's time for you to go to bed," Katherine quietly said. She trimmed the lamp by Alexander's bedside, and raised her own. She motioned Catriona to follow her.

Katherine had barely taken a handful of steps from Alexander's room when she heard a muffled sound behind her. She wheeled and saw Catriona catch her foot on the hallway runner and fall. She attempted to get up, a feat hampered by her current unsteady state. Katherine rushed to her aid.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see it there, which is funny as I suppose it's always been there. I'm so tired I think I could go to sleep here and never wake up."

Katherine precariously held onto her lamp in one hand while attempting to help up Catriona with the other. "That's understandable given the day you've had. I wish I could say things will be easier when you wake, but something tells me you and Alexander may not feel the best. Can you open your door for me? I've run out of hands."

Catriona opened her door, walked through, and promptly collapsed on her bed.

KATHERINE AGAIN PULLED her nightgown over her shoulder. She placed her lamp on the bedside table and centralised Catriona on the bed, as they had done with Alexander. She struggled to remove Catriona's boots, finally placing them at the foot of the bed. Mindful of Catriona's words about removing Alexander's belt, Katherine did the same. Her ignorance regarding the item of clothing made her fumble with the belt as she attempted to unclasp it. Finally successful, she began to pull the belt through the loops of the trousers.

Catriona eyes opened and she abruptly sat up. Her hands encased Katherine's. "What are you doing?"

Feeling like she'd been caught doing something wrong, Katherine could only manage to stammer. "I was loosening your belt so it doesn't dig into you during the night."

Catriona let go of one of Katherine's hands in order to unthread the belt through the loops in her trousers. She placed it beside her on the bed.

Mesmerised, Katherine couldn't tear her eyes away from Catriona. Her breathing hitched. With deliberate slowness, Catriona cupped Katherine's hand to her face. She let it rest there only fractionally, then turned her head and placed a soft kiss in the hollow of Katherine's palm.

Katherine was riveted to the spot as a warm sensation filled the pit of her stomach.

Catriona let out a deep sigh and released Katherine's hand. "Thank you for your help. I doubt I'd have been able to move Alex without you."

Katherine's confounded gaze alternated between her own hand and Catriona.

Catriona lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. "Go to bed, Katherine. I expect tomorrow's going to be a long day."

She silently picked up her lamp and left the room. On entering her room, she closed the door and mechanically placed the light on her bedside table. She lay down, too confused to sleep. Only then did she master her breathing which, until a moment ago, had made an able accompaniment to the staccato beating of her heart. She wondered if she'd been a part of what just happened, or if, indeed, it had been the epilogue to her surreal dream.

Lifting to her face the hand Catriona had kissed, she knew it had occurred. Her face was on fire, her feelings in turmoil. At first she'd been shocked when she saw Catriona looking at her like she had in Alexander's room. She couldn't precisely read Catriona's features in the muted light nor did she need to--the charged air between the two was enough.

She was even more confounded by the realisation that, once she'd recovered from her initial shock, she'd been flattered to think someone was looking at her in such a way. She knew what passed between them shouldn't be happening. But the feelings Catriona evoked in her warred with her ability to act rationally. After trimming her lamp, she rolled over and lay in darkness, trying to calm the confused emotions coursing through her.

CATRIONA LAY ON her bed. She wasn't sure whether the events of the day or the influence of alcohol had made her act so brazenly. Despite her best attempts, she hadn't been able to tear her eyes from Katherine's soft skin. Although she'd been caught staring, Katherine had made no immediate attempt to cover herself up.

She lightly stroked her lips and her mind lingered on the touch of her lips on Katherine's palm. It had taken all her willpower to release her hand, instead of pulling Katherine down on to the bed with her. She closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep, her thoughts caught up in what may have happened had she not managed to regain her self-control.

CATRIONA AWOKE THE next morning feeling like she'd fallen headfirst off her horse. It took her a moment, then she realised the thick furry object in her mouth was actually her tongue. Sitting up was met with a sharp reverberating pain through the back of her head. "I feel like someone's hit me with a lump of wood," she groaned. "I obviously failed to temper the amount of whisky I drank."

Lying back did nothing to alleviate her pain. Placing her hands on either side of her head, she recalled the evening's events after they had managed to get Alexander to bed. She winced, as she remembered her actions with Katherine. She knew Katherine would understandably want an explanation for her previous night's actions. She rolled over and groaned again. How could she tell Katherine she wanted her, as a man wants a woman? One thing was sure, she couldn't remain in her room all day. Matters involving Alexander and his recent loss were still yet to be resolved.

She gingerly hopped out of bed and shed the clothes she'd been wearing for over twenty-four hours. She needed a bath but wasn't sure she could manage it without her head permanently detaching itself from her shoulders. She splashed water into the hand basin and began rudimentary ablutions, attempting to make herself at least presentable. Finally fully dressed and moderately rejuvenated by her wash, she opened her curtains. "Oh shit." She quickly pulled them together. The brilliance which had pierced the window reflected off the inside of her closed eyelids.

With the strong light came the realisation that she'd well and truly slept in. She took her fob watch from the pocket of her soiled trousers and ran her fingers through her hair. "It's eleven thirty! I never sleep this late." She pulled on her boots and opened her door to a silent house.

Moving to Alexander's bedroom, she found the door open, his room empty and the bed made. She tiptoed past Katherine's closed door, assuming she was still asleep. She opened the study door, only to find it too had been tidied after the night's activities. The empty decanters had been returned to their correct places, and the glasses, now clean, were beside them.

Realising it had been sixteen hours since she last ate, Catriona quietly made her way to the kitchen. She halted at the kitchen door. Katherine sat at the table, calmly mending her torn nightgown.

Katherine looked up and smiled. "Good morning, sleepy head. I was beginning to wonder if you were ever going to wake up."

Catriona busied herself at the sink, her back to Katherine in an attempt to cover her embarrassment. "I don't think I've slept that soundly for years. I figure the alcohol had a lot to do with it. I haven't had such a bad headache for a long time. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes, please. I've cleaned up the study and tidied Alexander's room. I didn't rise until eight o'clock, but by then Alexander was already gone." Katherine placed the nightgown over a chair and retrieved two cups for their tea. "He hasn't left a note so I'm not sure where he is."

Catriona frowned. "He may have gone into town. I need to go there later myself." She seated herself as far away as possible from Katherine. "I'll check on him while I'm there."

An awkward silence descended over the table. Catriona nervously pursed her lips. "Katherine, about last night, I never meant to offend you in any way with my actions. In my defence, I had more whisky last night than I'd intended to." She placed her hands flat on the table. "I'll understand if you wish to move out. All I can offer is I'll be more circumspect with my drinking in the future."

"There's no need for an apology. We were both tired last night. As for moving out of the house, I think that's a little extreme. I'll leave if you want me to, but I'm happy to stay. Besides, I believe you may need some more assistance with Alexander over the next few days."

IN IRONIC RETROSPECT, Catriona couldn't help but think how correct Katherine had been, for that day heralded the beginning of a repetitive cycle with Alexander. He would rise early in the morning, ride into town, and spend his day propping up the bar at the local watering hole. He soon became withdrawn and sullen, not caring for the opinions of his friends or Father Cleary.

Catriona's days were consumed with riding into town, wagon hitched, to retrieve her brother. On arriving back at Gleneagle she'd bathe him and give him his dinner, which he barely touched. Despite her attempts to hide all the alcohol in the house, Alexander still managed to find it and drink himself into a stupor. The result was always the same, with Katherine helping Catriona get him to bed, the only difference being that Catriona never again allowed Katherine to see the same emotions she'd witnessed on the first night of Alexander's return.

As the first week passed, there was no respite in his actions. Alexander's cycle of self-destruction was one which neither Catriona nor anyone else could stop.

Chapter Ten

CATRIONA OPENED HER Farmer's Almanac and dutifully entered the temperature for the previous day. It was starting to heat up and wouldn't be long before the storm season arrived. She hoped the weather would hold off until they could get the harvest in. Maybe, she thought, Alex could employ the same workers they'd used the previous year.

Catriona closed her eyes and massaged her brow. Three weeks had passed since Alexander's return. Every day was the same emotionally draining routine, with her fetching her drunken brother from town, while Katherine attended to the household chores. The running of the farm,

which normally absorbed Catriona's day, was thrust into the background, subordinated by her constant need to care for Alexander.

What would she do about the seed for the next sowing? Alex usually haggled over a fair price. Catriona sighed, frustrated at not only managing her share of the farming tasks, but also her brother's. She couldn't afford to wait for him to get better and decided it was about time she paid a visit to the farmer's co-op. Otherwise they'd have nothing in the ground and no food.

Although Katherine entered the kitchen, Catriona's focus remained focused on the Almanac. "Morning," Catriona uttered.

"And a good morning to you too. Did you sleep well?"

Catriona inwardly cringed. Katherine was clearly doing everything she could to make the best of a bad situation. Catriona knew she was being plain rude. She looked up to see Katherine with her hair uncovered and a smile on her face. Without the veil and wimple Katherine's curly hair perfectly complemented her green eyes. Instead of looking stern and reserved, she radiated a presence which all but consumed Catriona.

Katherine's eyes twinkled. "What do you think?"

"Where's that thing you normally wear on your head?" Catriona asked in mock seriousness.

A wry smile lit Katherine's features. "That *thing*, as you so politely call it, has not been worn since Father Cleary's visit."

Catriona's face fell. You insensitive fool, she said to herself. How could you miss such a change? "I didn't realise. Between Alexander and running the farm, we've barely had time to see each other during the day, let alone talk." Catriona lowered her head and dragged her fingers through her hair.

"I understand. These past few weeks have been busy, and we've only had a few quick moments to talk. There's hardly been any time for any social interaction between us."

Catriona raised her pained face to Katherine's, wondering why she was so forgiving.

"And, as for the hat," Katherine said, her tone light. "You were right, as you so often are. Father Cleary agreed with you about my head wear. In fact, during his visit here one of the first things he said to me was," Katherine tried her best to impersonate the walk and mannerisms of the father. "'Sensible things cotton habits, and get rid of your infernal veil and wimple.'"

Catriona couldn't help but laugh, something she hadn't managed since Alexander's return. "You do a very passable impersonation of the good father."

"Of course I do," Katherine winked.

Catriona wondered if Katherine had any idea at all what happened to Catriona when Katherine looked at her like that. If she didn't, then why had she acted the way she had lately? Since the incident on the night of Alexander's return, Catriona had kept her distance.

On the other hand, Katherine acted like she'd taken no great issue with the matter. In the fleeting moments they'd managed together over the past three weeks, Katherine seemed intent on getting closer to her. The physical closeness they shared was no different than before that night. Yet Katherine's actions bespoke of an awareness her presence had on Catriona. And by the current look on her face, Katherine was enjoying the response it evoked.

Responding to Katherine's imitation of the padre, Catriona stood and performed a mock curtsy. "Father Cleary, I wasn't aware of your presence today. Please be seated and I'll fix us both some refreshments."

Laughing, they each dropped into a chair. Catriona felt a load temporarily lift from her shoulders, allowing her to relax more so than she'd managed to do in a number of days. "I'll be honest with you. I was almost completely sure he'd usher you out of the veil wimple and into the hat." Catriona smugly smiled. "After all, he's done that with all the previous sisters."

Katherine's jaw dropped and her eyes widened. "You rude woman! You knew he'd do that? Yet you let me wander around in the blistering heat in my veil and wimple. I could have died. Then what would you have done?" she asked in a mock scolding tone.

Catriona responded with laughter in her eyes. "I'm sorry, you're right." She held up her hands. "In my defence I'd like to add I tried to buy you a hat and you would have nothing of it. That *same* hat has, on numerous occasions, been left behind when you've left the house. I could've forced you to wear it, and would have done so, if your life was at risk. But there's one thing you must remember about the way things work out here. No one can make you do anything. The decision must be yours. You must be the one to take the first step."

Katherine intently looked at Catriona, as if carefully measuring the intent behind her words. "I think I let my stubborn pride get in the way, again."

Catriona clasped her hands behind her head and leant back in her chair. "I'm going to leave *that* comment alone."

Katherine swatted her. "I also understand the decisions I make have to be my own. All I can say is life is a continued learning experience, and I've learnt from this one. Maybe I'll be more willing to listen in the future." Katherine rose, grabbed her hat from the table and put it on. She twirled around in front of Catriona. "Perfect fit, don't you think?"

The hat suits you, Catriona mused, thinking that Katherine almost looked like another lady about town, and not a nun. She wondered how she would have conducted herself with Katherine had that been the case. "Yes, perfect," she softly said and caught herself. "I mean, I can't wait to hear about the response you get when you next visit the ladies' committee. Your new attire should be

worth quite a bit of mileage I should think." She rose. "Enough of frivolity, there's breakfast to make and work to be done."

With Katherine's assistance, the tasks were completed in no time. Catriona was grateful for Katherine's help, realising it couldn't have been easy given Katherine's own work commitments. Despite such obligations, over the past three weeks Catriona always managed to come home to find a meal prepared for her and Alexander and the bathtub in position by the fire. She couldn't imagine how she would have coped without Katherine's presence.

HAVING TIDIED THE kitchen, after breakfast Katherine returned to her room to collect the notes she required for her day's work, while Catriona prepared the wagon. By the early morning they were on their way. Wanting to maintain the air of closeness they'd re-established, Katherine searched for a topic which wouldn't quash Catriona's good mood.

She tightened the ribbon holding her hat in place. "What crops are you looking to plant in the coming season?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm not sure. Alexander normally deals with this area of the farm. Obviously at the moment he's in no fit state to do so. I'm lucky the town has a farmer's cooperative."

Katherine frowned. "I remember you mentioning that. What is it again?"

"It's a group of men, most of them farmers, who share advice on what crops to grow and how to achieve the best yield. It's something which started only two years ago and membership continues to grow. Hopefully they can point me in the right direction. I'm going to try at least one paddock of barley. It's a crop Alexander suggested."

"Did he mention any others?"

"No, he didn't. I tried to ask him about it but he got angry." Catriona's grip on the reins tightened. "I never knew drinking affected him like that."

It was most likely his way of mourning, Katherine thought, despite the pain it was obviously causing his sister.

"What business do you have in town today?" Catriona asked, in a transparent attempt to change the subject. "Not another death by boredom with the ladies' committee, I hope?"

"No, nothing of the sort. Father Cleary and I have matters which need to be discussed."

"I've no doubt the situation at the Pelham household will figure prominently in your discussions."

Katherine looked at Catriona's rigid figure. She reached out and lightly stroked her leg. "It's not like that at all," she quietly replied.

Catriona slumped. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so rude. I know you wouldn't do anything to hurt Alexander or me. My words were spiteful and inconsiderate."

"I'd be lying if I said the situation between you and Alexander won't be discussed by us. You must realise this isn't for the sake of idle gossip. Both he and I care for you both. We'd do anything to see the current situation resolved. Your apology is accepted as long as you remember if you want to discuss anything, there's no need for you to travel all the way into town to speak with Susan." Katherine was surprised at her last comment. For reasons she couldn't fathom she was becoming annoyed at how Catriona continually confided in Susan. After all, she was a nun and would not repeat private conversations the two of them might share.

Catriona glanced over at her, a quizzical look on her face. She opened her mouth to reply and quickly closed it, electing to merely nod.

Katherine tried again to strike up a conversation, "I couldn't help but notice the number of lovely watercolour landscapes around your home. Their similarity leads me to conclude the same artist created them. Are they painted by a local?"

Catriona eased her grip on the reins. "I'm glad you like them. They *are* locally done." She smiled crookedly. "I've a bit of influence with the artist. I may be able to have one painted for you."

"I'm afraid you'll have to tell him it may be a while until I can pay him for the works. My funds are rather scarce." Katherine was excited at the prospect of a purchase, yet frustrated she couldn't afford to pay for one outright.

"I'm sure a mutually beneficial arrangement can be worked out between you and the artist. Say, paint in return for favours perhaps?"

Katherine was shocked. "Favours, what--what do you mean?"

Catriona grinned as she looked at Katherine. "There's no need to worry. I think you've already treated the artist *more* than favourably. The works are my own. I used to paint when I was younger."

"I've never known an artist. Papa always regarded artists as frivolous and bohemian. Definitely not the sort of people he would socially mix with. Your works are quite good. You *are* a mystery, Catriona. Are you a natural or, as they say, did someone teach you?"

Catriona blinked twice as if doing a double take. "I didn't even know I had an artistic bone in my body. I didn't realise my ability until my mother employed my last governess, Adele Cooper, to teach me the finer arts of being a lady. She helped me to discover I had a talent for painting, among other things."

"You haven't said much about her. Was she as awful as your first governess?"

"Oh, no, we got on very well. She was much closer to my age than my first governess. Most of the time we were more like friends than teacher and student."

"She must have been a great comfort for you. You were lucky. All my governesses resembled religious relics. Is your last governess still in the district? I'd love to visit her and discover how she managed to coax such a prodigious talent out of someone as pragmatic as you."

Catriona's pained look was not lost on Katherine.

"I'm afraid she's not. Adele left the district after my mother and she had a disagreement on the curriculum she was teaching me. My mother felt her methods were," Catriona paused as if choosing her words, "somewhat unorthodox."

Sensing Catriona's discomfort, Katherine relented. From her reaction, it seemed Catriona must have missed her governess after she left. Rather than continue the conversation, and given their close proximity to town, Katherine spent the rest of the journey in pensive silence.

CATRIONA DROPPED KATHERINE at the steps of the accommodation motel.

"I'll call for you in about an hour." She released the wagon's brake.

Katherine dusted down her habit and fixed her hat. "Where are you off to?"

"I'm going over to the Co-Op and then, if I have any time left, I might pay a quick call on Susan."

Katherine turned away, but not before Catriona caught the look of frustration on her face. Katherine looked up, her smile forced. "I'll see you in an hour then."

CATRIONA'S TIME AT the cooperative was highly productive. She headed for Susan's mercantile, her thoughts lingering on the way she'd been treated by the majority of men in the town. Nothing was said regarding Alexander's recent actions. Yet, at the same time, they went out of their way to help her. Touched by their goodwill, she scrubbed away a tear and pulled the wagon to a halt.

Walking up the stairs, she caught her reflection in the store's window. The circles under eyes and gaunt face mirrored the struggle she'd experienced since Alexander's return.

Susan looked up when Catriona entered the store, her smile replaced with concern. Moving silently around the counter she locked the door, and then escorted Catriona to the rear of the store. Susan guided her over to a chair before sitting opposite her.

She reached out and softly touched Catriona's cheek. "Oh, Catriona, what are you going to do?"

Susan's touch and the tension of the past three weeks proved too much. Catriona bent over and clutched her stomach while she silently wept.

Susan wrapped her in her arms and held her until she was ready to speak.

"Oh God, Susan, it's so hard." She sobbed into Susan's shoulder. "Alex is hell-bound on drinking himself into an early grave, and the farm's suffering as a result. I spend my days working on the land and my nights playing wet nurse to Alex."

"Katherine's there. She *is* helping you, isn't she?"

"I couldn't ask for more. Her work around the house and her efforts to cheer me up has made things easier." She wiped her nose on her handkerchief. "I often wonder if I wouldn't have joined Alex if it weren't for her."

Catriona spent the next twenty minutes describing the events of the night of Alexander's return. Susan listened in silence, nodding occasionally.

"How are things between the two of you?" Susan casually queried.

"She's changed, Susan. It's as if she realises something happened on that night, and the effect it had on me. I can't rightly describe it, but her actions are different. If it were a normal situation, I'd almost say she's naively flirting with me. During trip into town today, when I mentioned I was coming to speak with you, the look on her face. If I didn't know any better I'd say she was jealous. I've been very careful about any physical contact between us. Given how she's acting and the way I feel about her, well, I hardly trust myself."

Susan scratched her chin, "I don't rightly know what to say. The way she treats you may have changed. I'll wager my life savings she has no idea or isn't fully aware of the effect she has on you. Given the current state of affairs with Alex, I suggest you tread carefully."

The clock chimed and Catriona looked up. "I better be on my way. I left Katherine with Father Cleary and said I'd pick her up in an hour." Catriona smiled at the image of Katherine standing on the step of the hotel impatiently tapping her foot at Catriona's lateness.

Susan rose and Catriona pulled her into a hug. "Thank you so much."

Susan patted her back. "That's what friends are for. Considering the way your emotions are being tossed from pillar to post, I've no doubt it's been good for you to be able to speak so openly."

"It has. I hope Me Lin realises how lucky she is."

Susan smiled. "She does, but then, so do I."

CATRIONA NEGOTIATED HER way around the myriad of potholes in the well-worn road.

"How was your visit with Susan?" Katherine asked as they pulled clear of the town.

"Quick, but fine. What about yours?"

Katherine shrugged. "I think Father Cleary's slightly worried I'm not paying enough attention to my religious duties."

Catriona made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat. "It's not as if you have time. Particularly given the hard work you've been doing with the children's education."

"I'm not all that worried. In fact I've had worse lectures from my Mother Superior. I very much believe he's sympathetic to everything going on at the moment." Katherine lightly grasped Catriona's arm. "And, before you ask, we didn't specifically speak about you or Alexander. Although, I expect he's not completely ignorant of what's going on."

"That's not hard, given I'm riding in to town every evening to pick him up. Speaking of which, I need to get home. There's a fair bit of work I need to finish today, and I still need to head back in to pick up Alex. I don't mean to sound rude. But I'd like to focus on getting us home."

Katherine reached for the edge of the wagon. "That suits me too. I've a number of lessons waiting for me when we get there."

The remainder of the return journey was fast and silent, and it wasn't long before Catriona had pulled the horses into the shade afforded by the side of the barn.

Katherine walked to the house, leaving Catriona to tend to the horses. It's going to be a hot one. Catriona sighed. It would be so nice to do nothing but sit in the shade. Even the distance between the house and the barn was shimmering in the afternoon's heat. Shaking herself out of an introspection she could ill afford, she walked into the barn and to the work awaiting her.

KATHERINE HAD SPENT the past three hours preparing lessons, and had almost been too engrossed to hear the sound of a wagon coming up the driveway. It was late in the day to be receiving visitors, and her curiosity got the better of her. She put down her quill and went to the window. In retrospect, she was glad she did.

She stepped onto the verandah and could just make out Susan negotiating a wagon down the path from the front gate. The person riding behind her made Katherine frown. "What's Father Cleary doing here--and with Susan?" she muttered.

Katherine walked around to the front of the house and she raised her hand in greeting. Her salutation wasn't returned, and her stomach lurched in uncertainty. Something wasn't right. Why were they here when she and Catriona had visited them only this morning?

Katherine caught a slight movement out of the corner of her eye and turned to see Catriona emerge from the barn. Catriona's relaxed form became rigid as she strode down the driveway toward the oncoming wagon. Katherine did the same. Catriona broke into a run and so did she. Hampered by her unwieldy habit, the distance between them increased, and Catriona arrived at the wagon first. Katherine was still too far away to make out the words being said, but nothing could block out Catriona's cry of anguish when she arrived at the rear of the wagon.

Susan made a valiant effort to restrain Catriona. Finally reaching the two, Katherine instinctively started toward Catriona, but halted at the look on her face. As if in slow motion, Katherine looked in the wagon and her blood turned to ice. In the rear was a pine box, similar to the ones she'd seen on her first day. Susan struggled to keep Catriona from opening the coffin's lid.

Katherine jumped when Father Cleary spoke to her in hushed tones. "There was an accident in the town this morning not long after you two left. Alexander staggered out of the hotel straight into the path of the weekly coach. Despite the driver's best efforts, he couldn't avoid him. The horses were on Alexander before the driver knew it. I've said prayers for him and will prepare a service for tomorrow at the family graveyard. I'm so sorry to see him come to an end like this. He had so much to live for."

Susan guided Catriona's robotic figure toward the house, and Katherine's heart wrenched at the sight. How much more was Catriona going to have to bear? She wished she could hold her and tell her the pain would pass. Katherine caught herself, realising those were the same words she'd offered to so many on the day of the dust storm. They sounded hollow now. What spiritual comfort can she offer to someone who was now entirely alone in the world? She was jolted back to the present by Father Cleary's voice. "Pardon me, Father, what were you saying?"

"I'm sorry, Sister. I know this isn't easy for you either. We must get the coffin inside before the heat affects it. I think it would be appropriate if we place it in Mr. Pelham's room. Can you manage one end? I'm reluctant to ask for Miss Pelham's or Mrs. Crosier's assistance, given the current circumstances."

"We can only try. It might be best if we move the wagon to the part of the yard adjacent to his room. We can carry the . . . him through the French window entrance. That might be the quickest route. Then we can see if we can help Mrs. Crosier." Not waiting for a response, Katherine climbed onto the wagon and urged the horse forward.

SUSAN SAT ON the parlour's chaise lounge cradling Catriona in her arms. Despite the tears flowing down Catriona's face, she was silent. Susan gently pulled out of their embrace and looked at Catriona's grief-stricken face. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"How did it happen," she asked, her voice choked with emotion. "What was he doing? He knew I'd come and get him. God, why didn't he wait?"

Susan pulled her back into her arms. "No one really knows. I know this doesn't help what you're feeling right now, but I don't believe he would have suffered much. Susan felt Catriona's body shake with grief. "I can't tell you how sorry I am. I wish I could find a way to make things better, but I can't. All I can say is you must allow yourself to grieve. Don't bottle it up or it will tear you apart. Remember there are friends here to help you." She looked up when the door opened. Susan continued to hold Catriona close, uncaring of the image they were presenting.

KATHERINE FALTERED AT the intimate tableau. She felt she should be comforting Catriona. From behind her she heard Father Cleary's sharp intake of breath. Recovering from her selfish thoughts, Katherine went to Catriona's side and silently placed her hand on her shoulder.

Father Cleary stopped in front of the three women. "I'm truly sorry, Catriona, for your brother's death. I hope you can take comfort in knowing he has gone to a better place and I'm sure God,"

Katherine felt Catriona's body stiffen. Tearing herself from Susan's grip and Katherine's hand, Catriona wheeled on Father Cleary and Katherine, her face red, eyes on fire.

"Look at you both! You're like a pack of religious vultures waiting to swoop in for your prey! And you." She stabbed her finger at Father Cleary. "How can you stand there and honestly tell me this fits somewhere into the scheme of things! Come on, Father, explain to me about this all-loving, forgiving, omnipotent God of yours. How can he take my mother and father, Sister Coreen, and *now* Alexander? They were good people, not evil. All their loss has created is more pain. Or is that what your religion feeds on--the suffering of others? You do what you have to do, but don't stand here and lecture *me* on the benefits of Alexander's death, for there are none." Her gaze alternated between Katherine and Father Cleary, her breathing ragged. "You bury him or do what you like, but don't offer me religious platitudes." Catriona raised her clenched fist and shook it at them. "Get out of my house, both of you!"

Stumbling backwards out of the parlour Katherine was shocked. She'd never seen Catriona so angry and was amazed she could turn on them like she did.

"It's grief," Father Cleary said. "Some people react to it in different ways. She's never been an overly religious person." He shook his head. "Although I never knew she felt so strongly about the church. Under the circumstances, Sister, I think it would be best if you relocated into town for a few days. At least until the initial shock has passed."

Katherine vehemently shook her head. "On the contrary I think my place is *here*, where I can do the most good. You've said it yourself--she's obviously grief stricken. What happens when she comes out of her present state and finds no one here? Do you want to be burying another Pelham by week's end?" Her last words were critical of Father Cleary's proposed course of action, but she didn't care. More than ever, her rightful place was here with Catriona.

Father Cleary blinked, as if surprised at Katherine's outburst. "I think you're being slightly melodramatic suggesting Miss Pelham would do something so drastic. Stay if you wish. Tread warily though, Sister. At the moment Miss Pelham's emotions are not altogether under control. I'll see you at the funeral tomorrow. If you change your mind, then you can return to town with me. Please excuse me, but I've matters I must attend to prior to tomorrow's service." He took his hat and quietly showed himself out of the house.

Katherine walked to the barn and un-harnessed Susan's horse. Once finished, she walked silently through the house, frequently pausing outside the door of the parlour, and listening to Catriona's sobs and Susan's muted tones, all the while longing to go inside and help. It hurt her to think of what Catriona was going through. Given her last reception, she reluctantly left the door unopened and returned to her room.

THE APPROACH OF darkness heralded a light knock on Katherine's door. She opened it and found a fatigued Susan standing there.

Susan smiled. "I knew you were made of stronger stuff. I knew you wouldn't leave. Catriona's words this afternoon were said in anger. She didn't mean them. Although she's never made any bones about her opinion of the church, with you, Katherine, it's different." Susan grasped Katherine's shoulder. "You must know that by now. Over the next few days, she's going to need your help to get through this. I don't mean to sound rude, but do you mind if we have something to drink?"

Touched by Susan's words, Katherine managed a surprised yes and led her to the kitchen. "Where's Catriona?" She whispered over her shoulder.

"I've put her to bed with a slight dose of laudanum to help her sleep. I can't find her bedclothes, so I've left her in her bloomers." Susan took a seat at the table. "Mind you, it doesn't matter. After all, we're all women."

"Surely it's too late for you to return home tonight," Katherine said. "And besides, I'm not quite sure what sort of reception Catriona would give me at the moment. I can make up her parent's room if you like." At Susan's nod, Katherine busied herself with lighting the stove.

SUSAN GAZED AT Katherine. It was easy for her to see why Catriona felt the way she did. Katherine's green eyes and innocent face, shrouded in pixie-like curly hair, belied a beauty

which, under other circumstances, well... Susan cleared her throat. "I think you'd be surprised by the sort of reception you'd receive. All the same, it is too late to return. I mentioned to Me Lin before I left that I may not be home tonight. She'll bring me out appropriate clothing for tomorrow's service. Thank you for your offer. I'd be more than happy to spend the night."

Katherine set about preparing a supper for the two of them.

DESPITE THE SUDDENNESS of Alexander's death, an incredibly large number of townsfolk gathered the next day for his funeral. The conspicuous absence of the ladies' committee was no surprise to Katherine. But she was touched by the attendance of many of the committee's husbands. Yet, by far, the working families made up the greatest representation, having taken time out of their busy day to pay their last wishes to a man well respected within the district.

Catriona didn't detract from her normal shirt and trousers, her only dispensation being her attendance in blouse and trousers which were cut for a more formal occasion. No one noticed, or if they did, felt no need to comment on her attire. After the service, the working men, who had arrived with their families, approached a staunch Catriona. They spoke to Catriona with a form of awkward gentleness which, at times, had Katherine swallowing back tears. Hat in hand, they offered her pledges of assistance whenever she should need it. Despite her grief, Catriona had a kind word for each of them.

FATHER CLEARY PLACED his fob watch into his vest pocket. "I best be going. I don't think there's very much more I can do at this point in time. Are you staying, Sister Flynn, or would you like me to take you in to town?"

"I think it would be best if I remain here. Catriona has settled down since yesterday. Despite the food the families left with her, I doubt she would feed herself if she was left alone."

Father Cleary put on his hat. "As you wish. We'll speak further on this matter next week."

After the father left, Susan came down the stairs. "I'm sorry, Katherine, but I must be going as well. Tomorrow is the monthly purchase day for a number of the outlying families, and I need to be there for it." She patted Katherine's arm. "If you need me then don't hesitate to come and get me."

"Where's Catriona?" Katherine asked as they walked toward the barn.

"I know it's only early afternoon, but I've put her to bed again with a watered-down glass of laudanum. I swear I've no idea where that woman keeps her nightclothes. I still couldn't find any."

Katherine's thoughts strayed to the night she'd attempted to undress Catriona and to Catriona's response. "Is she still clothed?"

"No," Susan replied as she guided her horse from its stable. "I've undressed her and placed her clothes on the chair by her bed. She should be right until morning." Susan held up a rein. "Can you give me a hand?"

After helping harness the horse, and with a final wave to Susan, Katherine mounted the stairs. The house, which had been so full of people during the day, was now quiet. Katherine cleaned the mess from the day's activities, her thoughts drifting to Catriona. She'd looked so proud and yet so lonely standing by the graveside. Why must God cause such pain to such a lovely woman? Katherine suddenly realised her thoughts were focused not on Catriona's spirit but with the woman herself. Again she heard Mary's mocking words. Raising her hands to her cheeks, she realised she was blushing.

Reconciling she'd also been jaded by the day's events, she moved through the dark house only pausing at Catriona's open door to reassure herself she was still asleep. Walking to her own room, she only hoped Catriona's slumber would last until morning.

KATHERINE SAT BOLT upright in bed.

"Mama! Papa! Alexander!" Catriona's cries fell silent. "Adele, where are you?"

Katherine jumped out of bed and fumbled to raise the wick in her lamp.

"Katherine, where are you?" Cursing at the lamp's reluctance to fully light, and concerned at Catriona's increasingly frantic state, she grabbed the lamp and softly ran to Catriona's doorway.

Moving through the entrance, she found Catriona sitting up in bed, her face contorted with fear and falling tears. Catriona turned to Katherine, her arms outstretched in supplication. Disregarding the distraught woman's nakedness, Katherine lowered her lamp to the bedside table and took Catriona in her arms.

She gently rocked her, waiting for Catriona's sobs to abate. "It's all right. I'm here. Everything's going to be fine. Today was the first day in the healing process. Why don't you lie back down and get some rest? I'm next door if you need me." She attempted to lower Catriona on to the bed. "I'll leave both our doors open in case you call."

Catriona clung on to her even harder. "Don't leave me alone. I don't want to be alone, not tonight. Stay with me, please. I need you."

Katherine, her own emotions in turmoil, hugged Catriona hard. "I'm here and I won't leave you," she whispered in her ear. "Although if I'm to stay, you're going to have to let me put the lamp out," she calmly replied, trying to soothe Catriona.

Catriona released her and shuffled across the bed, in turn providing a space for Katherine. Katherine extinguished the lamp and climbed into bed, only to be again subjected to Catriona's vice-like grip. It was some time until Katherine's reassuring words were sufficient for Catriona to finally release her, so they could both get some much needed sleep.

KATHERINE AWOKE THE next morning as she always did, to the sounds of the cockatoos heralding the start of her day. Laying on her side and taking a moment to relax, she felt a reassuring arm around her waist, and a body spooned against her own. Recalling the previous night's events, she tried as gently as possible to remove Catriona's arm from around her. Unfortunately, the blankets they were under held Catriona's arm in place.

As carefully as she could manage, Katherine pulled back the bedcovers and, little by little, shifted Catriona's arm. Her attempts required her to follow the arm's path, resulting in her rolling over to face Catriona. Her eyes widened when she suddenly remembered the way she'd found Catriona the previous night. Catriona was naked from the waist up.

Shocked, Katherine reached to pull the blankets back over Catriona. Her hand paused in midair. What happened if she woke her up? For reasons she couldn't fathom, Katherine's focus was inextricably drawn to the body in front of her. Even on her side, she saw Catriona's shoulders were broader than those of a normal woman's. These were complemented by her arms which, even in repose, hinted at a strength hidden beneath the skin.

Katherine's eyes trailed down to Catriona's narrow waist. She slowly raised her eyes to Catriona's chest and caught her breath. Her breasts were slight, unlike her own, which were well rounded. Mesmerised by her well-toned body, Katherine's breathing quickened. The feeling in her stomach felt like she hadn't eaten in days, but she knew this wasn't the cause. Katherine softly bit her bottom lip. Curiosity, or something else she couldn't quite describe, enveloped her with a compelling desire to reach out and touch Catriona.

Glancing up at Catriona's face, Katherine found she was awake. She blushed, realising she'd been caught staring and was reminded of how Catriona had stared at her on the night of Alexander's return. Try as she might, she was spellbound by Catriona's azure eyes.

Time slowed as Catriona appeared to struggle with her emotions. Very slowly she raised her hand and brushed a curl from Katherine's forehead. Katherine's breath stopped. The spot where Catriona had touched her felt like it was on fire.

Catriona lowered her hand to Katherine's shoulder. "I'm sorry for what I said to you the other day in the parlour. I meant what I said about religious platitudes. But *not* what I said about asking you to leave. I'm glad you didn't. Last night, when I woke up and couldn't find anyone, I thought I was all alone. Thank you for staying with me. It makes a change to wake up with someone beside you."

Katherine struggled to calm emotions which had gone haywire at Catriona's feather-light touch. Before she could utter words of thanks, Catriona closed the slight distance between them, and lightly brushed Katherine's lips with her own. Katherine's heart hammered, and a strange blossoming warmth simmered between her thighs. Catriona's lips barely touched hers, yet she was profoundly aware of the mark they left. Katherine tentatively moved closer to Catriona, capturing her lips with her own.

Catriona's hand encircled her waist, pulling her even closer and, as if unbidden, Katherine's hand fanned across Catriona's sculpted back. She felt the play of muscles beneath the flesh under her hand. Her lips slightly parted when Catriona's tongue slowly entered her mouth.

Katherine's mind was running a race of its own. She'd never felt this way--as if she were drunk and not responsible for her own actions. Taking her lead from Catriona, Katherine tentatively used her tongue to explore the inside of Catriona's mouth.

Catriona's hand, which had so skillfully stroked Katherine's back, traced a path to her front. Drawing a slow line up from her waist, Catriona cupped Katherine's breast, gently using the fabric between thumb and breast to tease the nipple.

Katherine gasped and broke contact.

"Katherine, are you all right?"

"No, I'm not. I don't know. I'm not sure." Katherine sat up in bed. What did she want? Her eyes widened in sudden realisation that these were the unorthodox ways the ladies' committee had alluded to regarding Catriona. Her time in the convent and her relative inexperience with men didn't make her an expert on intimacy, but she knew what they'd shared was socially taboo. Her confusion was multiplied by her private acknowledgment that she'd enjoyed it, and had in fact returned Catriona's kiss.

CATRIONA MADE NO attempt to re-establish contact with Katherine. She'd been aware of Katherine's eyes on her, and her heart had quickened at the prospect of taking her in her arms. She had been elated when Katherine returned her kiss, and was careful not to take things too quickly. Now she wondered whether she'd expected too much.

She sat up, making no attempt to hide her nakedness. "Now you know why the richer women of the town shun me. I don't think they know I like women as I should men, but I expect they have their ideas. Trust me, I didn't mean to force myself on you. It's just, when you returned my kiss, you confused me."

Katherine remained silent.

"I once told you no one can make you do anything. The decision must be yours," Catriona said.

Katherine nodded, her face flushed.

"There's something between us. I *know* there is, but you must look inside yourself to see if it's what you want. My actions have revealed what my feelings are, but I'll not destroy a friendship with something that's not reciprocated."

Katherine's confusion was plain to see. "I don't know what I want any more. I'm not sure. I need time to think about what has happened between us. I won't lie--I feel something. But I need to work through what has happened. I have no idea where this leaves me as a person *or* a nun. I just don't know." Katherine placed her head in her hands.

After a prolonged silence, Katherine finally looked up at Catriona. "As for the town's thoughts on the matter, I've already told you their opinions are insignificant to me." Katherine rolled away from Catriona and stood. "I need to meditate on this further before I make a decision. Please give me the leeway to do so."

"You've all the freedom you want, Katherine. Regardless of what outcome you reach, I'll abide by it. I only ask two things of you. First, ask yourself what it is *you* truly want, *not* what others expect of you. Secondly, you tell me your decision. I'll not ruin a friendship by pressing you for something which isn't reciprocated. You're welcome to stay here." Catriona looked into Katherine's eyes. "I promise this won't happen again, unless you want it to."

Katherine silently nodded and left Catriona's room. Catriona flopped back on her bed, her emotions in turmoil. In a matter of days she'd lost someone dear to her heart and yet found another. Had she also lost Katherine?

Chapter Eleven

IN THE DAYS following Alex's funeral, Catriona silently mourned the loss of her brother. Masking her grief under the pretence of checking the cattle and the young crops in the paddocks, she spent a great deal of her time away from the house and Katherine, reminiscing and shedding tears in his memory.

Australia was an unforgiving country, which didn't allow the luxury of long, drawn out displays of mourning. The land grew and changed, oblivious to anything or anyone standing in its path. Despite the pain she was feeling, Catriona knew she must continue with her work or risk seeing the paddocks engulfed by weeds. With some crops the invasion of weeds wasn't an issue, but at least two of her crops would be sorely affected by the presence of such a menace. She knew she needed help to weed those particular crops, let alone prepare the unsown paddocks for the oncoming season. Casting her mind back to the day of the funeral, she recalled the words of assistance given to her by so many. She hoped they weren't hollow promises.

CATRIONA RAISED HER head at the sound of multiple wagons coming down her drive. Putting aside the scythe she'd been sharpening, she walked out of the barn and was met by at least fifteen wagons filled with families and led by Joseph Connor.

"What are they doing here?" Katherine asked, as she reached Catriona's side.

"I'm not sure." Catriona wiped her hands on the back of her pants and walked to where his wagon had come to a halt. "Joseph, is there anything the matter?"

He jumped down and held out his hand. "Everything's as fine as could be expected, Miss Pelham."

Catriona rolled her eyes. "How many times have I told you to call me Catriona?" She took his hand.

He shuffled his feet. "I know, but the missus," he thumbed over his shoulder to Mary, "would have my guts for garters if I did that."

Catriona chuckled and then gazed at the group of wagons. "It looks like you're heading somewhere."

"That we are. We're headed here." He was joined by a group of men from the other wagons.

"I don't understand."

Joseph took off his hat and glanced behind him. After receiving a nod from the other men, he turned and faced Catriona. "Two weeks ago we made you a promise, and we're here to keep it. We're here to help with your crop."

Catriona stepped back. "You can't. I mean, I'm very grateful for your offer. But it's the height of the season. Don't you have crops to tend to yourself?"

"Miss Pelham, there ain't one person here today who isn't somehow beholden to you and your family over the years. Why, many of us would've been turned out of our homes and, at one time or another, forced to go elsewhere for work if it hadn't been for the generosity of you and yours. You and I aren't fools either. How many times have you offered my whole family work which could have easily been done by only a few?"

He turned to the group behind him. "And how many of us have seen presents and food for our families mysteriously turn up at Christmas, when we ourselves didn't have two pennies to rub together?" Heads nodded and families mumbled in assent.

"So don't you stand here and tell us you've no idea how you can repay us for what we do here today. In truth, this is our repayment to you for treating us as if we was equals. Not like that lot

that live in those fancy places in town." Sensing he had said enough, he pulled his hat back on his head.

Catriona stepped forward, too choked with emotion to utter words of thanks. Where words failed her, her actions didn't. Grasping the man's hand, she firmly shook it.

"Men," Joseph said, "let's get that gear unloaded." At his words the men sprang into action to unload the many and varied farming tools from the backs of their wagons.

Catriona turned away in an effort to conceal the tears she brushed from her eyes. Looking up, she met Katherine's gaze, tears freely flowing down her face. Before Catriona could say a word, Mary Connor lightly touched Katherine's arm.

"It's fine, dear. This is how it's done out here, between friends."

Katherine wiped her nose. "You couldn't have offered your help at a better time."

Mary dismissively waved her hand. "To tell you the truth the men have been champing at the bit for the past two weeks, waiting to help. I hope you don't mind, Miss Pelham."

Catriona shook her head. "I don't know how I'm going to repay you all."

"There's nothing *to* repay." Mary tilted her head toward the men. "Now why don't you go and help that lot, while the other women and I prepare lunch for you all. With all that's to be done, I'm sure you'll work up an appetite in no time."

"Thank heavens," Katherine sighed. "I'm not sure I could cook for all of these people."

"Don't worry about that, Sister." Mary held up a basket. "Each woman has packed enough to go around. All we need is a kitchen. Why don't you work with the children, and leave the cooking to us?"

Katherine smiled at Mary and Catriona. "I think that sounds like a wonderful idea."

By the sheer weight of their numbers and working into twilight, the group achieved alone what would have taken Catriona weeks to do. The only thing for her to do now was to sit, wait, and pray the rains would come and assist her young crops to maturity.

KATHERINE WAVED FROM her seat on the wagon next to Catriona. "Good morning Mrs. Comyns. Will you be home tomorrow?"

"All day," Mrs. Comyns replied. "Do you need anything, Sister?"

"No thank you. But I've a surprise for your children that I hope will, in turn, give you some more time."

Mrs. Comyns shifted the loaded basket she carried from one hip to the other. "Then I look forward to seeing you."

Katherine turned and lightly touched Catriona's arm. "I can't wait to see the look on the children's faces."

"I'm glad those books have finally arrived. I swear, if you had to wait any longer you might have burst."

Katherine smiled. "I didn't realise I was that obvious."

Catriona spared a glance at Katherine. "I'm glad you're happy." She broke her gaze and faced the road ahead. "Do you have a meeting with the ladies' committee today?"

"Fortunately, no. Since Father Cleary's returned they're more than happy to entertain him. But I do have a meeting with him. He's keen to discuss some religious matters, plus my current work with the children."

Catriona snorted. "Hopefully that won't be too painful."

"It shouldn't be. What business have you got in town?"

"I've got to pick up a new plough blade from Susan. The work the other week resulted in me breaking the last of my spare blades. Unfortunately, no amount of effort by Robert, the blacksmith, could fix it. He'd said he'd ask Susan to put one aside for me." Catriona reached out and patted Katherine's thigh, "Rest assured there'll still be enough room in the back of the wagon for your books."

SUSAN LOOKED UP in time to see her door open. Catriona stepped aside to allow Katherine to enter. The look of thanks which passed between them made Susan grateful no one else was in the store. If she wasn't mistaken, something had happened between them.

Katherine walked to the counter, a brilliant smile on her face. "How are you? Thank you for your message about the books. I was beginning to wonder whether they'd gotten lost somewhere. I believe I could have written one or two myself in the time it's taken for them to arrive."

Susan laughed at Katherine's light-hearted tone and relaxed features. "They may have been long in coming, but I don't think you'll be disappointed." She gestured to the box in the corner. "See the tea chest over there? It's yours and it's full to the brim with books. Go on, take a look."

Susan had barely finished speaking before Katherine almost skipped across the floor to the tea chest. "How wonderful!" Pulling out the books, she examined their covers then placed them on the floor. "It looks like there's something here for everyone. Just think, if I could get regular shipments of these, I could almost open up a library," she said over her shoulder, her attention overwhelmingly consumed by the contents of the chest.

Satisfied Katherine's focus was elsewhere, Susan furtively glanced at Catriona, who was absorbed with what Katherine was doing. "What news do you have, Catriona? I've hardly any news myself. The ladies' committee is on a righteous campaign at the moment. They've set up shop outside the local pub, chastising any man caught carousing with the professional women."

Susan laughed as she folded a piece of cloth in front of her. "Oh, and I hear our bushranging friends have been active again. Last week they entered a grazier's property not ten miles from here and held the family at bay before making off with a substantial amount of jewellery. I'd hazard they're getting a bit too bold. It shouldn't be long before they're caught."

She smiled, aware she only had half of Catriona's attention. Susan attempted to elicit a response resembling something other than a nod and a grunt. "I hear you had a number of helpers at your property last week. It must have been a great help to you. It would've taken you days to complete all that work by yourself."

Catriona broke her gaze from where Katherine sat, now covered in books. "I never realised my family had done so much until I saw those people out there."

Susan patted her hand. "I told you, good deeds do amount to something."

"Unfortunately though, in the course of the day, one of my plough blades broke. I normally loan the plough to the O'Hara's for their planting so I'm keen to have it replaced before he asks. Did Robert tell you to put one aside for me?"

"As a matter of fact he did."

Catriona's eyes lingered on Katherine.

Susan smacked her hand down hard on the counter, and Catriona whipped her head around. "Now tell me," she insisted, lightly touching Catriona's arm to maintain her attention, "what *other* news do you have?"

Catriona blushed and pretended to clean an invisible spot off the glass counter. "Oh, um, I'd heard about the increase in bushranging. Other than that nothing much out of the ordinary has happened." She studiously avoided Susan's questioning stare.

In a pig's eye. Susan was sure that, through viewing the interaction between the two, something had happened since she'd last spoken with Catriona. Eager to find out what was going on, but reluctant to ask in Katherine's presence she said, "I'm sure any news you have for me is better than none at all. How about you join me for some morning tea?"

Catriona's mouth opened and closed and she again looked in Katherine's direction. She cleared her throat and returned her gaze to Susan. "I'd love to, but I've got to take Katherine to her meeting with Father Cleary--" Catriona jumped at Katherine's sudden presence.

"There's no need," Katherine said. "He's only up the street, and even for someone as delicate as me, it's well within walking distance." Katherine ambled toward the door, unaware of the colour which had risen in Catriona's cheeks at her unintentional mention of her fragility. "You two have morning tea and a talk--unless of course you wish to come and talk over some religious issues with Father Cleary and me?" Katherine teased.

"Ah, thank you for your offer, but I think a cup of tea is more appealing. I'll pick you up in an hour if you like. Is that enough time for you and the father to finish your discussions?"

Katherine nodded. "I'll see you then."

Susan swept around the counter and locked the door. She turned to Catriona, her hands clasped. "Now how about you come out the back and tell me *exactly* what's been going on?"

CATRIONA TOOK A seat at the table and relayed the incident between the two of them in Catriona's bed, the morning after Alex's funeral. Susan's face was inscrutable throughout the telling while she non-verbally acknowledged Catriona's story.

Catriona massaged the back of her neck. "I didn't mean to kiss her, but when she kissed me back, I thought she wanted more."

Susan pensively tapped her lip. "Has she indicated whether she's made a decision?"

"No, but at least she hasn't moved out of the house. And, trust me. I've been very careful not to get too close to her." Catriona sighed. "I sense things have subtly changed between us. There's awareness with her now, in terms of what she does to me. She'll brush by me, or gently touch my arm or leg, much more than she used to. She *must* know what that does to me."

Susan shrugged. "Maybe she does. Her actions at the moment very much remind me of a young filly I had as a child. She's skittish, like she's dancing across a field, unsure of her ability to gallop on such fine legs, but afraid to take the first step. I expect she's attempting to make sense of the closeness the two of you now obviously share."

Catriona reached for a piece of cake. "You and your darned sixth sense. How did you know something had changed between Katherine and me?"

Susan leant forward in her chair. "Sixth sense be damned. I'd have to be blind not to notice the difference. It's written on both your faces. She looks at you with softness capable of melting anyone's heart. And you! Despite what you've said, your preoccupation makes me wonder if you're going to sweep her up into your arms and ravish her."

Catriona scratched her head. "Am I that transparent? I wasn't aware."

Susan smugly folded her arms. "If your feelings were any more obvious you could bottle it and sell it." Susan gently grasped Catriona's hand. "All I'm saying is be careful of who's around when you look at her, that's all. Most of all watch yourself when you're in town. This place has eyes everywhere."

Catriona spent the remainder of the visit discussing Katherine's idea of a library. They laughed at Katherine's unbridled enthusiasm, agreeing a library would go a long way to giving the opportunity of education to all that needed it, rather than to a selected few.

On finishing their lunch, both women returned to the main part of the store. Catriona easily lifted Katherine's box of books and took them out to the wagon. She returned and picked up the new blade for her plough then, with a wave goodbye, she headed for the hotel to pick up Katherine for their journey home.

KATHERINE LEANT BACK and surveyed the chaos in front of her. As a result of a number of births in the district in the past two weeks, her time had been more than capably filled with helping the town's midwife. Between that and Father Cleary requesting her attendance at the regular scripture classes in town, there'd barely been enough time to sort through her books. At least Catriona had given her a bit of a hand--when she wasn't reading the books of course, instead of placing them in the appropriate pile.

Given the storm they'd had the previous night, Catriona had left early to check on her crops, advising Katherine she'd be home around dark. This left her alone. "Finally," she said to no one in particular, while she sorted through the books.

Absorbed in the task of allocating books according to children's needs, Katherine was oblivious to another presence in the house until she heard the parlour door open. She smiled and placed a book on one of the piles. "You must have galloped around your crops, Catriona. I was sure you'd be gone for much longer--" She froze. Standing in front of her was Mary Carraghan.

"Hello, Katherine," Mary said, as if her visiting was an everyday occurrence.

Katherine scrambled to her feet. Again she sensed the uneasiness in her stomach she'd come to associate with Mary and, lately, Catriona. "What are you doing here? It's not safe for you to be this close to town. Plus Catriona could return at any minute." She looked over Mary's shoulder, willing Catriona to materialise.

Mary casually sat and crossed her legs. "And it's nice to see you too, Sister. As for Catriona's early return, that's doubtful. She's currently heading up to the paddock which borders the Anderson property. It's a good two to three hours there and back. Don't you worry about me being this close to town. I've been a lot closer and escaped." She eased herself deeper into the dimpled leather chair. "Why don't you sit down and make yourself comfortable?"

Keeping her conflicting emotions in check, Katherine remained standing. "You still haven't answered my question. What are you doing here?"

"Calm down, you look more flustered than the first night we met. There's nothing sinister about my visit, if that's what you're thinking. I was up north when I heard of Alexander Pelham's death. I wanted to ensure you were all right and, of course, pay my respects to Catriona."

Unsure of how Catriona would react to the woman who had abducted her, Katherine stifled a laugh. "I know you mean well, but I don't think you'd be well received by her. I'll pass on your message. Now I think it would be best if you'd leave."

Mary eased out of her chair and headed toward Katherine, who retreated behind the tea chest of books, effectively placing a physical barrier between them. "What's the matter? Don't tell me you're afraid of being in the house with a desperado? Are you afraid I might ravish you or something?"

Katherine's eyes widened and her cheeks reddened when she remembered what had occurred between her and Catriona. "How dare you! Of course I don't think that." She struggled to regain her composure. "It's just, for someone with such a high price on her head, you're not very careful, are you?"

Mary laughed. "Life is one big gamble, Katherine. I've raised the stakes by following this profession. My time will come soon enough, and it's nothing I can run away from. There are many places I'd not feel safe in, but this isn't one of them."

Katherine studied Mary's easy manner thinking she was as bad as Catriona. They might be both strong and independent, but that could get a woman into a lot of trouble. She stopped herself, shocked at the realisation that she was comparing Mary to Catriona. What disturbed her more was that her comparison went beyond mere personality traits. Both Mary and Catriona possessed the ability to evoke a visceral response in her, which she seemingly had no control over.

She looked back at Mary, who was now quizzically staring at her. "If you insist on risking your own neck, the least I can do is offer you something to drink." Taking a wide berth, Katherine walked out the door toward the kitchen, not bothering to see if Mary followed her.

MARY TOOK A seat at the table while Katherine busied herself with making a pot of tea. Her brows knitted at the interplay of emotions which crossed Katherine's face, as if she was excited by her presence, yet she sensed a fear in her. Mary puffed up her cheeks, then released a breath of air. She didn't think Katherine feared for her safety. It was something else. Katherine sat opposite her, and the difference in her demeanour was more obvious, yet still something she couldn't quite put her finger on. "Is everything all right?"

Katherine clasped her teacup. "Aside from the fact I'm sitting down drinking tea with a bushranger?"

Mary smiled. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. You're being very evasive about something." She scrutinised Katherine's face as redness steadily crept up Katherine's neck. "You've changed somehow."

Katherine stood. "I'm sure we've still got some leftover cake in the pantry from last night's dinner. I'll get it."

Mary couldn't help but think Katherine was being very secretive about something. Her mind toyed with the possible reasons for Katherine's reaction. She stopped at the thought of Catriona. She hadn't met her, but she was still aware of the help Catriona had given to the less fortunate families. She'd heard of her kind-heartedness. Could it be possible that something more sinister lay beneath a veneer of such philanthropy?

She followed Katherine and stopped at the door to the pantry, boxing her in. "How's Catriona treating you? I know her brother's death hit her quite hard, and I've heard of her temper. She hasn't hurt you, has she?" Mary asked, surprised at the interplay of emotions on Katherine's crimson features.

Slowly the kernel of a thought took seed. Lips pursed, she creased her brow. She thought back to the night of Katherine's kidnapping, and her reactions to her questioning about Katherine and Catriona's relationship. She folded her arms across her chest and leant against the doorframe. "I think my last question should have been," a knowing smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, "what's going *on* between you and Catriona?" So pleased was she at Katherine's reaction that she nearly failed to catch herself when Katherine forcefully pushed her out of the way.

"How *dare* you!" Katherine yelled, her green eyes afire, her chest heaving in barely suppressed fury. "How dare you speak to me of such things? You may be comfortable to live your life in that manner. Need I remind you I'm a nun and answer to a higher calling? I won't have you discuss either myself or Catriona like that," she finished, her body now perilously close to Mary's.

Undaunted and also thrilled by Katherine's reaction, Mary quietly laughed. Stepping ever closer to the agitated figure in front of her, she met Katherine's eyes with her own. "To paraphrase a great man, 'Me thinketh the lady doth protesteth too much.'"

KATHERINE WAS FRIGHTENINGLY aware of Mary's proximity, she was close enough to feel the rush of Mary's breath on her face. Her own breathing was laboured and, despite her indignant response, she felt warmth in the pit of her stomach, uncontrollably caused by the outlaw's nearness. "I think you should leave," Katherine said as levelly as she could manage. "You've *more* than outstayed your welcome."

Mary's eyes remained locked with her own. "If that's what you want."

"It is. Now please go." Katherine turned to move away from Mary's hypnotic presence.

Mary caught her arm in a vicelike grip and propelled her even closer to where she'd been standing only moments ago. Mary's other hand locked itself around her waist, drawing her close, until her lips were almost brushing Katherine's cheek. Mary trailed her fingers down Katherine's arm to reach her soft pliant hand. She leant forward until Katherine felt Mary's lips near her ear.

Katherine's body betrayed her, and she fleetingly melted into Mary's arms.

Mary laughed. "I see. Your protests *were* too great. Don't let that bother you though, for they have fallen on deaf ears." Stepping quickly out of their embrace, Mary was gone before Katherine could rationalise what had occurred.

Katherine groped for a chair and sat, willing her breathing to return to normal. She'd felt the same feelings in Mary's arms that she'd felt during that morning with Catriona.

Katherine placed her head down in her hands and wept. What was she doing here and what had she come to? She was a nun, here to do God's work. How could she possibly feel the same way for Catriona that Mary does for other women? But she must, otherwise why did she react the way she did just then? And why did she respond the same way with Catriona?

Her emotional turmoil raged throughout the afternoon while she sat, almost statuesque, at the kitchen table. The afternoon shadows lengthened and she at last she knew what she had to do.

KATHERINE'S FINGER ABSENTLY traced the frame that bordered the delicate watercolour above the mantelpiece in the study. She canted her head at Catriona calling for her. Lowering her hand, she turned when the parlour door opened.

"There you are. It looks like you bit off more than you could chew," she said, her voice laced with humour. "I swear this mess is much the same as the one I left you with this morning."

Katherine mutely nodded.

Catriona frowned as she quietly walked across the room. "Is everything all right?"

"I think you should sit down." She motioned her to a chair and took the one opposite. "I need to say something. All I ask is that you please let me finish without interruption. What I'm about to say isn't easy, but I've given it a lot of thought." She waited while Catriona took a seat.

"Catriona, you're the closest friend I have. You're considerate and funny, patient, and kind. What happened between us has never happened to me, and I can now admit it's shaken me." Catriona opened her mouth and Katherine raised her hand. "Don't misunderstand me. I'm not passing judgment on the way you live or who you are. In all honesty, I'm passing judgment on myself. I need space and time to think. While I stay here with you, I can't do this with any degree of clarity, not with you so close. I'm sorry, but I think it would be best for both of us if I lived in town."

Catriona's face fell and she slumped in her chair. "I don't understand. I haven't touched you, like I did, since that morning. But I feel a difference between you and I, and I know you must too. Isn't my word good enough for you?" She searched Katherine's face. "Don't you trust me?"

Katherine trusted Catriona implicitly--it was herself she didn't trust. "I trust you, but I need time and distance to put this in perspective. I'm sorry, but I can't do that here." At the anguished look on Catriona's face, Katherine instinctively leant forward to comfort her, but checked herself. "Don't get me wrong. Just because I'm moving into town doesn't mean I won't still visit you." She paused at the presumption of her final words. "*Does it?*"

Reaching forward Catriona clasped her hands. "It doesn't mean that at all. You'll always be welcome here either as a guest or an occupant, should you change your mind. I know you believe what you're doing is a reasonable course for you to take. But please don't ask me to openly accept your choice, because I can't. If this is what you want to do, then the decision is yours. Just tell me," she pleaded, "that you're not going to move in with one of the ladies' committee."

The pain in Catriona's eyes was almost too much for Katherine to bear. "No, not at all. I was going to ask Susan if she'd mind if I stayed with her for a while."

Catriona choked back a laugh. "How ironic," she murmured, her head lowered.

"Pardon?"

Catriona dismissively waved her hand. "It's nothing you need to worry about. How are you going to explain this to Father Cleary?"

"I expect it'll be hard for him to understand. I'll use the same reason for living with Susan that I used with you. My circumstances won't change. I'll still be tending to the ill and poor of the town. Something tells me that, while my tending to the less fortunate and having them able to visit me bothers the town's ladies, if I've read her correctly I don't think this will bother Susan."

"Why now?"

Katherine stood. "I know this is very sudden, I--I need time." Katherine closed the study door behind her.

Catriona put her head in her hands and released an exasperated breath. "I wonder if you'd be so keen to move in with Susan if you knew what *her* circumstances are." She knew Susan wouldn't turn Katherine away and maybe what Katherine was doing was for the best. Maybe the distance between them would allow the time Katherine needed to realise how she felt about her. But what happens if she doesn't?

IN A MATTER OF days arrangements had been made. A slightly confused Susan graciously welcomed Katherine into her modest abode above the store, despite the fact that Catriona was

obviously less than wedded to the new arrangement. Susan showed Katherine to her room, explaining the house's other occupant, Me Lin, was currently visiting relatives in Sydney and wasn't expected to return for a few weeks at least.

The absence of any great amount of space meant Katherine stored her books at Catriona's. For this Katherine was glad. She at least had a reason to visit Catriona. For, despite the change in living arrangements, she was adamant their friendship wouldn't suffer.

Father Cleary had been somewhat confused by the turn of events but was surprisingly accepting of Katherine's request.

The only person not altogether accepting of what had transpired was Catriona, who was again left with only the echoes of an empty house to keep her company.

WITHIN A COUPLE of weeks, Katherine settled into her routine at the store. While she was still a willing aid to the families of the district, at least twice a week she conjured a reason to pay a visit on Catriona. When this wasn't the case, Catriona's second home had become the store, all of which was playing on Susan's progressively stretched nerves.

Susan whistled a tune while she counted the stock on her shelves. She was grateful to have the store to just herself and her customers. She thought of Katherine's current appointment and snorted. Another mind-numbing afternoon tea with the ladies' committee. This, of course, meant Catriona was also nowhere to be seen.

As she silently made a list of the provisions she needed to restock, the door of the store opened. Susan glanced up to see an exceptionally well dressed yet dust-covered woman enter. She's clearly arrived on the stage, Susan thought, while the woman took time to rid herself of some of the dust of travel.

Susan silently appraised her. She was the same age, if not slightly older than Susan, with raven hair that cloaked the delicate features of a handsome face more familiar with English drawing rooms than the Australian countryside. Her well-proportioned features were complemented by a dress which could have only been the latest fashion. As if aware she was being scrutinised, the woman raised her violet eyes and gazed at Susan.

Susan's heart lost a beat. Who was this woman, and what was she doing here?

"Good afternoon. I'm wondering if you can help me?" said the woman, smiling while her eyes keenly examined Susan's body.

"I'm terribly sorry. I've temporarily misplaced my manners." Susan extended her hand. "I'm Susan Crosier, the owner of this store. If you don't mind me saying you're obviously not from around here, are you?"

"Yes and no," the woman replied as she took her hand. "I used to live here, but it's been a few years since I left. I'm looking for someone by the name of Catriona Pelham. You wouldn't know her, would you?"

Any response Susan tried to form was frozen on her lips.

The woman continued to hold Susan's hand. "I'm sorry, how rude of me. I haven't introduced myself. My name is Adele Cooper."

Chapter Twelve

"I'M SORRY, WHAT did you say your name was again?" Susan attempted to buy precious time to gather her thoughts. She knew quite well who Adele was. She was more than sure only one other person would register greater surprise at her return, and that was Catriona.

"Adele Cooper," she replied in her soft English accent, her gaze lingering on Susan's face. "I used to work at the Pelham property as governess to the Pelham children. I left some time ago and returned to England. I've only recently returned to Australia."

"Pardon my bluntness. Am I correct in assuming Catriona isn't aware of your arrival?"

"Yes, I happened to be in Sydney when I literally ran into Mrs. Greystone at the emporium."

Susan wryly smiled. "I expect pursued might be a better word."

Adele nodded. She pulled a pin from her hat and then removed it from her head. "She mentioned there had been a great deal of tragedy with the Pelham family, with the most recent being the loss of Catriona's brother. My plans were reasonably flexible. So I thought I'd come out and pay a visit."

Susan speculated that Sydney was a long way to come for merely a visit. She inwardly smiled while she looked at Adele. If there was one thing Catriona possessed, it was impeccable taste in women. Adele had a quiet assuredness about her which placed Susan at ease. She would definitely be an interesting person to hold a conversation with. Maybe another time. "Although there've been some changes in town, they haven't extended to adding any form of transportation service within the immediate district. If you give me a moment to close up, I'd be happy to drive you to Gleneagle. Catriona's a *very good friend* of mine and it would be remiss of me not to deliver you to her doorstep."

Adele raised her brow and enigmatically smiled, as if the emphasis Susan had used wasn't missed. "Thank you, I'm grateful for your help." Susan locked the store and, after preparing the buggy, both women headed toward the Pelham homestead, talking all the way.

Susan wheeled the buggy into the driveway of Gleneagle. "I have to say, after filling you in what's been happening since you left, I'm surprised so much *has* actually come to pass in a town the size of ours.

They crossed the grate, and Adele's face sobered. "And it's so sad to think Catriona's parents lost their lives here. She must have been beside herself."

"I don't know what she'd have done if Alexander hadn't been here."

"And now he's gone also. How is she coping?"

"It's taken her a while, but I believe she's at last coming to grips with his death."

"What about the local sister? The one who was to marry Alexander? Has she been replaced? In my time they were made to live in the hovel outside of town. The dust storm has thankfully put an end to *that* disgrace."

Susan took an inordinate amount of time rearranging the reins. "Yes, in fact the new sister arrived the day of the dust storm. Fortunately she got here after the event or we may have also lost her. Her name's Sister Katherine Flynn and she's worked miracles with the children of the district." Susan didn't mention her effect on Catriona. "She lives above the store with me." She felt no need to explain to Adele this was only a recent arrangement.

"Hopefully I'll get to meet her then."

Susan wondered whether Adele's return was merely a passing visit or something more permanent. "She's normally very busy. Although I've no doubt you'll catch up with her sooner or later. Because of the size of the rooms above my store, Catriona has graciously allowed her to keep her children's books here at the property."

Susan drew the buggy around to the rear of the house, reined in the horse, and both women got down.

"Given the time of day, I expect she'll be outside here somewhere." Susan walked toward the barn. "Catriona, are you there?"

From the darkness of the smokehouse, Catriona emerged, wiping her hands on what appeared to be an already greasy towel.

Susan heard Adele catch her breath. Catriona raised her hand to her face to shield her eyes.

"When I last saw you," Adele whispered, "you were no more than a teenager. Now look at you."

Adele's comments were not missed by Susan. "Yes, she's a beautiful woman."

CATRIONA WIPED HER hands on her towel, curious about what would bring Susan out so late in the afternoon. She stepped into the sunlight. Blinded by her sudden transition from darkness to light, she raised her hand to her face.

"I hear you Susan, but I'm a bit troubled by the glare at the moment." Catriona could just make out the vague outline of a woman standing next to Susan. She blinked, in an attempt to focus. "Sorry for keeping you both out in this heat. Where are my manners?" She walked toward the two. "I'm sorry, but I don't think we've met."

"Don't you know me, Catriona?" Adele answered in a quiet voice.

Catriona's heart missed a beat and her mind filled with a myriad of conflicting emotions: confusion, memory, search, recognition, disbelief and, finally, a desperate longing.

"Adele?" Catriona whispered, half hopeful, half fearful. Her eyes finally focused, she took in Adele. "My God," she said, gaping, "I can't believe it's you." She went to hug her and, remembering Susan's presence, checked herself.

Catriona drank in the apparition before her. Despite the passing of years, Adele was even more beautiful than when she had last seen her. "How are you? What are you doing here? What have you been doing all these years?"

Adele laughed in delight. "Why don't we all go inside and I'll answer that for you?"

Susan interrupted. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to decline. If I don't return soon I won't be home before dark. With the increase in bushranging activity in the district, it's a risk I don't want to take." Susan pulled herself on to her buggy. "I'm sure there'll be time for us to speak more when you're better settled. I'll see you soon. Oh, and Catriona, I do have some stores arriving on this Friday's train. Don't forget to come and pick them up, will you?"

Catriona mutely nodded, recognising Susan's last comment as the well-known code between the two that she wished to speak with her, most likely about this recent development.

Susan waved goodbye and went on her way.

Catriona picked up Adele's bags, and they made their way to the back of the house. Adele closed the door and turned to Catriona, who had placed her suitcases next to the table. Looking at Catriona, her violet eyes twinkling, she opened her arms. "Now, are you going to finish what you almost started outside?"

Catriona needed no more prompting and moved into Adele's embrace. "God, it's so good to see you." She basked in the feel of being in another woman's arms. "What brought you here? How did you know you'd be welcome out here, given your last departure?"

Adele laughed and she released Catriona. "Still the curious mind, I see. Before we sit down, could I have a few moments to wash?" She held up her hands. "The roads out here are as dusty as I remember them to be. Could we also have a bite to eat? I'm starving."

OVER A LIGHT repast Catriona listened to Adele relay what she'd done in the ensuing years since her banishment from the Pelham household. After being sacked without references, she'd been unable to find a placement anywhere and had decided to go home to England. She was booking her passage when, by chance, she encountered a young family who were doing the same. She'd graciously helped the mother with her unruly children, and the suffering mother had complimented her on her skill. Adele explained what her employment was and the fact she was going home to seek a position there. She was offered a job on the spot. After proving her worth on the voyage, she'd remained in the family's employ. The choice for her was a natural one, that when they again sailed for Australia she would return with them.

"You wouldn't believe the coincidence but on my second day in Sydney, I was shopping in the emporium and ran into Mrs. Greystone." Adele rolled her eyes. "She treated me like I was her long lost friend."

"Stupid old busybody," Catriona mumbled.

Adele grinned. "If I recall correctly you had a similar lack of respect for the Greystone's when I was last here."

"Some things never change."

"As I was saying, she spent the afternoon regaling me with what had happened in the last ten years. Truth be told, I couldn't have given a fig to sit with her for so long." She reached across and took Catriona's hand. "But I was very keen to know about you. Fortunately I didn't have to ask such a blatant question, as Mrs. Greystone then told me about your recent tragedy." Adele's thumb lightly stroked Catriona's knuckles. "I'm so sorry, Catriona."

"Thank you. It's been hard to accept his passing. But I know I must go on."

"What about you? What have you been up to?"

"After the loss of my parents, Alex and I decided to continue to run the farm, and it's proven to be a successful venture. Having Coreen here also helped to centre him." Catriona sighed. "Prior to that, he was a bit of a lad, not to mention the target for every single girl in the district."

"I expect you've had your fair share of male callers, haven't you?"

"I may have, but the interest was never reciprocated. I told my mother I'd never conform to her expectations of a daughter, and I never have. As time's gone by, I've found myself more than comfortable living that life, away from the pretensions forced on women of my age."

"What we shared," Adele asked, as if choosing her words carefully, "was there anyone else?"

Catriona's mind's eye immediately filled with the elfin features of a smiling woman. Was what she shared with Katherine the same as what had been between her and Adele? As much as Catriona wished it were so, Katherine had virtually made her position clear when she'd moved into town. Despite that, she still spent an inordinate amount of time at Gleneagle. Realising she was taking far too long to reply, she raised her eyes. "No, nothing that's been reciprocated." That was the truth, wasn't it? "What about you?"

"I expect I've been more fortunate than you. In London society, a woman who doesn't have close female friends is considered unusual. She was an older woman of independent means," Adele replied, a wistful look on her face. "Our arrangement suited her."

Catriona felt the stirrings of jealousy and tamped them down knowing she had no more control over Adele's personal life over the last ten years than Adele had of hers.

"I don't think she was all too pleased when I said I was going to Australia. I'm sure though, should I never go back, she'll find someone else."

Catriona's breath hitched. Adele wasn't committed to returning to England? What did that mean for the two of them? Despite the flicker of hope, she was cautious not to read too much into Adele's comments.

Adele looked at the clock above the wood stove. "Heavens, I don't believe we've been talking for so long. I expect if you're going to get any sort of an early start tomorrow we best call it a night."

Catriona looked at the fob she drew from her trouser pocket. "Do you remember when you were last here you were stuck in those cramped quarters out by the barn?"

Adele laughed. "I remember it all too well."

"No more of that for you, for tonight I think my parents' room is the suitable place for a guest of your standing." Catriona rose and, with Adele following her, made her way down the hallway.

As they walked through the house, Catriona paused at Adele's gentle touch on her arm. She turned, her brows creased.

"While I'm flattered at you giving me your parents' room, I think I'd be much more comfortable in this one," she suggested. Catriona realised they were standing outside the door to her room.

Adele's fingers gently traced a trail down Catriona's arm until their fingers were entwined. Raising her eyes to Catriona, Adele opened the door and led her through it, where the two rekindled intimate memories long dormant through long years of separation.

CATRIONA AWOKE, HER body languishing in the feel of being in another woman's arms. Thinking back on the night's events, she was touched by the tenderness of their lovemaking. Unlike the stolen moments of intimacy she'd shared with Adele years ago, there had been no urgency between them. Instead, their loving was a more mature ritual, like two friends renewing an old acquaintance.

Spooned in Adele's sleeping embrace, Catriona shifted when Adele's hand found its way to her breast. Catriona reacted, melting into the luxury of such a peaceful moment.

Laying there in the early morning light, her thoughts guiltily strayed to Katherine and the morning they'd shared together. Katherine had undeniably reacted to Catriona's touch, and their all too brief contact lingered in Catriona's memory. As she thought about Katherine, she felt the stirrings of desire and was ashamed. She was in the arms of a woman who had taught her well about the arts of love, and now she was repaying her by thinking about someone else.

She shook her head to dispel the thoughts. In reality, she could indulge in any number of fantasies involving Katherine. But that might be as close as she ever got to the real thing. Regardless of Katherine's words on that morning, Adele held her now, not Katherine.

She was troubled by her reluctance the night before to tell Adele what had happened between her and Katherine. A part of her rationalised her thoughts, suggesting her lie by omission was to protect Katherine who, in truth, hadn't initiated the intimate contact between them. If she was honest, a selfish and secretive part of her didn't want to share the yet-to-be-defined nature of their relationship with Adele.

CATRIONA HANDED ANOTHER watercolour to Adele. "And then there's this one."

"It's our waterhole! This is absolutely exquisite, Catriona. Stop blushing. You have a prodigious talent. Trust me. I've been to a number of exhibitions in London. Some of those paintings wouldn't hold a candle to yours. You convey an emotion which captures the essence of the moment." Adele pointed at the picture. "And the way the wind is blowing through the spinifex here. It's as if I can feel it on my face." She handed the picture back. "If you ever tire of farming then you could paint for a living. You would profit greatly from your efforts."

Catriona placed the painting down beside her and shrugged. "I don't know that I ever could. I mean, I find I have to be in the right mood to paint, otherwise they end up looking awful." She bit the bottom of her lip. "I painted a picture of you, but mama found it and took it away."

Adele reached across and took Catriona's hand. "Oh darling, I'm so sorry."

Catriona grinned. "At least now I have the real thing to work on."

"Speaking of which, I expect your days aren't normally spent this close to Gleneagle, but you've been doing that since I arrived." Adele lightly laughed. "Don't get me wrong. I'm more than happy for our days and nights together, but I hate to think you're foregoing work for my sake. You're not, are you?"

"It's only been a couple of days. I'll ride out again next week and check the stock."

Adele frowned. "It's Friday, isn't it?" Catriona nodded. "Didn't you agree to get some stores from Susan today?"

Catriona masked her embarrassment by picking up the paintings and returning them to their storage box. "Yes, I did," she answered, her back to Adele. Her eyes lit up and she whirled around. "Would you like to come with me?" She knew exactly what Susan wanted to talk about, but Susan wouldn't dare be so forward if Adele were there.

Adele rose. "To tell you the truth, I'm worn out. I think I'll stay here if you don't mind."

Catriona reddened at the double entendre in Adele's words. "Well, ah, I better be on my way." She gathered Adele into her arms and slowly kissed her. "I'll see you when I get home."

Adele's fingers trailed down the front of Catriona's shirt. "I'll be waiting for you," she replied, her eyes never leaving Catriona's.

TAKING THE MERCANTILE stairs two at a time, Catriona tried the front door and found it locked and decided to go around to the back.

She walked through the side gate to the rear. Framed in the kitchen window were Susan and Me Lin, in what could only have been a passionate conversation. Neither touched the other, yet the depth of their love was unmistakable. As Susan spoke, delight and laughter danced across Me Lin's features. Catriona smiled. She could see the bond between the two ran deep.

Seeing them like that, Catriona wondered if Katherine could ever feel for her the way Me Lin felt for Susan. She came back to earth with a resounding thud. What was it about Katherine? Catriona marveled at how Katherine had managed to ensconce herself so deeply in her thoughts. How could she be thinking of her, when she and Adele were finding each other again? She craned her neck from side to side, attempting to clear her mind of its conflicting deliberations. She put her hand on the back door handle, and purposefully rattled it.

"Good afternoon," she said as she walked inside. Years of cautious instinct made Susan and Me Lin to quickly step back, before they fully realised who their visitor was. Catriona chuckled at

the guilty looks on their faces. "And well should you look at me like that." She placed her hands on her hips. "What would happen if I'd been Katherine and found you speaking with each other, with such blatant looks of adoration on your faces?"

"I suspect no sillier than you would have felt had she been at the homestead and saw the look on *your* face when Adele arrived," Susan teased and then laughed. "My my Catriona, I do believe you're blushing. And a nice shade of crimson it is. Come and have a seat. You look like you're going to pass out, if the colour of your face is anything to go by."

Me Lin gave Susan a soft kiss and left the two women.

Susan closed the back door. "What's going on, and how is it Adele's found her way back into your life after so many years?"

Catriona baulked at Susan's question, and she searched the room as if looking for something, or *someone*.

Susan reached across and lightly took hold of Catriona's chin. She turned Catriona's face to her own. "There's no need to worry. Katherine set out very early this morning for the Connor farm. I don't expect her home for a while yet."

Catriona's brows furrowed. "I didn't see her on my way into town." She contemplatively pursed her lips. "We should have passed each other, given the Connor property is next to mine."

"She left early, and you're *unusually* late this morning," Susan said, a twinkle in her eye.

Catriona flushed again. Susan snorted and she reached across and grasped Catriona's hand. "If you could only see the look on your face--it's precious. I'm sorry. I shouldn't be teasing you. Why don't you start from the beginning?"

Catriona relayed to her how, by sheer luck, Adele was once again back in the Australian countryside. Catriona shyly told her of the rekindling of a relationship she thought was lost. Susan smiled at her fortune and, yet, at the same time Catriona sensed Susan was worried about something.

"What are Adele's long term plans?" Susan casually asked.

Catriona shifted in her seat. As she contemplated the idea of Adele staying, she couldn't help but hear a tiny voice in the recesses of her mind asking if that was what she wanted?

She looked up and realised Susan was still patiently waiting for an answer. "We haven't discussed her plans. I'm fairly sure if I asked her she'd be more than willing to stay. Her tenure as governess to the family she was with is complete. I get the feeling she's a free soul."

Susan raised both eyebrows, as if to silently state the obvious question.

"I don't know. It's like for the first time in my life I have within my grasp what I want. Adele knows me. She's warm, humorous, exceptionally good looking, well educated, and an extremely sensual woman. As for her staying on a more permanent basis, I haven't thought about it." She realised that this was a lie, knowing a great deal of her time since Adele's arrival had been spent pondering just that prospect.

Susan sat back and intently studied at Catriona. "Where does that leave Katherine?"

Catriona's head jerked up as if struck. Was she so transparent? Angry at Susan's apparent ease in reading her thoughts, she retaliated. "She knows all too well how I feel, and she *still* left Gleneagle. Of course she figures in my daily thoughts. How could she *not* be there? But hell Susan, what else can I hope for between us? At least with Adele my feelings are reciprocated. I could spend the rest of my bloody life pining after Katherine, and she may never bloody well know what she wants. What I have now may be as good as it gets."

"Are you sure Katherine *doesn't* know what she wants?" Susan continued in a level tone.

"For Christ's sake!" Catriona pushed the chair out from under her. "What's that supposed to mean? She's *here*. I'm *there*. I truly don't think I can expect any more."

"If you're so damned sure, then why does she spend the evenings here boring me to bloody distraction waxing lyrical about you? And how is it despite living *here* she spends an inordinate amount of time out at *your* property? Don't tell me it's got something to do with those damn books. They're a smokescreen, at best." Susan's nostrils flared and she gripped the edge of the table, in an obvious attempt to rein in her temper. "Answer me this if you dare. Have you spoken to Adele about Katherine yet?" She grunted. "I can see by the look on your face you haven't."

Both turned when the door to the upper floor opened, admitting a concerned Me Lin. "What's the matter? I'm upstairs with the bedroom door closed and yet I can hear you both as if you were standing beside me."

Susan stood and fiercely hugged Me Lin. After reassuring her everything was fine, Me Lin again left the two, but not before she cast a warning glance at Catriona.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean for my words to be so harsh or so loud."

Catriona pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. "No, *I'm* the one who should be apologising." She sank back into her seat. "You're right about Katherine and it's driving me crazy. She does come and visit, and we talk about all number of things but it's like she's walking on coals. She begins to bring barriers down between us. But, when I move closer she puts them back up again. It's like she's afraid of herself and her own feelings." Catriona crookedly smiled. "And you're right--I haven't spoken to Adele about Katherine. Well, not in *that* sense anyway."

"I think Katherine's feelings are confused by what her religious teachings say regarding what you shared, and she's as scared as hell. Not from eternal damnation but how to deal with the emotions which are pulling her apart.

"I don't think she's ever been with anyone, man or woman. In matters of the heart, I'd hazard she's relatively naive. As for telling Adele, it's up to you. But is that fair?" Susan moved around the table and crouched by Catriona. "Can you truly be happy with what you have with Adele? If you can, that's all good and fine. Just don't end up despising her for something you never gave yourself the chance to have."

Catriona scrubbed her face and neck. "You say Katherine speaks a lot about me and yet she doesn't know what she wants. I don't know what to do. Believe me, I've thought long and hard, and I still can't find a way forward. I'd appreciate any ideas you might have."

"I do have one. I can't guarantee it'll bring her any closer to reconciling her feelings one way or another." Catriona nodded, encouraging Susan to continue. "I expect a large part of her problem may be coming to grips with the notion of a relationship between two women. So why don't we show her there's nothing wrong with this?" Susan held up her hands. "Don't look so shocked. I'm not suggesting you fall into Adele's arms in Katherine's presence. Remember I mentioned the idea of a dinner party a while ago? Have you given it any further thought? I believe it would be an excellent opportunity for Katherine to witness social interaction between women. Maybe it will set her thinking."

Catriona pondered the idea, playing the evening through in her mind. Her heart missed a beat when she realised she'd have two women she had a deep emotional attachment to under her roof at the same time. Regardless, the risk was one she was willing to take.

"Given the current circumstances, I suppose things can't get any worse. I'll approach Mrs. Johnston again about preparing us a meal. I'd approached her about such a possibility back when we first discussed a soiree. I'm afraid if you allow me to prepare dinner then the result may be unusual, to say the least."

Susan looked at Catriona, eyebrows creased. "I think it would be a good idea if you spoke with Katherine first and made her aware of your visitor. I'm not saying tell her everything, but at least prepare her for Adele's presence."

Catriona was rapidly warming to the idea of a dinner party. "I'll speak with her next time she's out at the house. After all, as you say she always incorporates a trip to the farm whenever she's out that way."

Catriona's eyes searched Susan's. "Shit," they said in unison, simultaneously realising Katherine's homeward trip would undoubtedly bring her past the Pelham homestead.

Chapter Thirteen

KATHERINE BEGAN HER journey home, her thoughts dwelling on the smiles that had lit up the Connor children's faces when she gave them their books. It had certainly been a long time between drinks since they'd last received books.

She smiled at her use of the colloquialism, recognising it as one of Catriona's favourites. A picture of her appeared in her mind's eye and Katherine sighed. Despite the contact she maintained with Catriona, she did miss their evening discussions and the humour Catriona managed to inject into a story about the day's events. That wasn't to say she was uncomfortable staying with Susan and Me Lin. They were perfect hosts. On three separate occasions, she'd managed to hold a conversation with the exceptionally serene Me Lin. During one such discussion they'd spoken about the different philosophies of religion existing between western and eastern societies. Katherine was surprised at the contrast, with the west having a proportion of its foundations in fear and damnation and the east on peace and acceptance. Despite her western-based religious upbringing, she was deeply touched by the calming spirituality of Me Lin and her teachings, and she resolved to learn more.

Although her friendship with Susan and Me Lin was one she treasured, in the quiet moments Katherine's thoughts strayed to Catriona. Their connection was nothing physical--it was more so an invisible link between the two which made her feel at home in Catriona's presence. With her, she never felt that she had to conform to what everyone expected of her.

She wondered how Catriona was faring. Her evenings had to be terribly quiet all by herself, not to mention her days. Resolute, Katherine clicked the reins. "In fact why don't I pay her a visit? After all, I do need to pick up some more books." She giggled, thinking what excuse she would have used to validate her visits if the books had been held at the store.

After tethering the horse in the shade of the trees by the barn, she made her way to the back of the house and opened the unlocked door. She never ceased to be amazed at that. In Ireland, no family would entertain being away all day and leave the house unsecured. Out here it was the norm.

She made her way to the study where the books had been relocated after her departure. She made herself comfortable on the floor and sorted through the books she'd need for the next few days. At the sound of footfall, a smile rose to her face. "I didn't expect to find you at home at this time of the day."

She looked over her shoulder and her happiness turned to surprise. A tall, slightly Rubenesque figure covered by a light yellow blouse and skirt stood in the doorway. Her face had a paleness about it which hinted at a more genteel life. What struck Katherine most were her inquisitive violet eyes. "Who are you?" Katherine blurted out and scrambled to her feet.

Adele's eyes crinkled, making her appear younger than she was. "I must unashamedly admit to having an advantage over you. You're obviously Sister Flynn." Stepping through the doorway, Adele extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Sister. My name is Adele Cooper."

Catriona's last governess? she thought. The one who had gone to England? "Pleased to meet you." She took the proffered hand and quickly let go. "I'm sorry, if I'd known Catriona had guests I wouldn't have barged through the house like I did."

"There's no harm done. In fact she's told me of your arrangement."

Katherine's eyes widened slightly, and despite her best attempts she fidgeted, something she hadn't done since she was a teenager. Gripping one hand in the other, she at last managed to get her nervousness under control.

Katherine cleared her throat. "She told me all about you as well."

Miss Cooper raised a hand to her throat, as if to conceal the colour rising there.

"She told me you were the one who taught her how to paint the lovely watercolours around the house. She has a real eye for detail. Her mixing of colours makes the paintings come alive. They're truly wonderful."

Miss Cooper released a breath. "She was a good student with an eagerness to learn. I don't think anything I taught her about painting helped her though. Her talent was always there. It would have been uncovered sooner or later at an opportune moment in time."

"That may be so, Miss Cooper, but it's certainly not how Catriona tells it. When I was living here she spent many an evening discussing your influence." Katherine motioned toward a chair.

Miss Cooper took time to smooth her skirt and then met Katherine's enquiring gaze. "I thought Susan mentioned you were living at the store. I didn't realise you've also lived here. It's a shame you're still not out here, Sister Flynn. I'm sure we could have had some wonderful discussions during the course of an evening. Between the two of us we may have even convinced that stubborn woman to paint again."

"Miss Cooper, I'd feel a lot more comfortable if you'd call me Katherine. Sister Flynn is so out of place out here, don't you think?"

Miss Cooper nodded. "And you must call me Adele," she said, a smile lighting her features. "I believe there's enough formality in the world without imposing it where it needn't be."

Katherine felt herself warm to Adele. Given her previous employment, it would be very interesting to spend the rest of the afternoon speaking with her. She was sure Adele would have some wise words on the ways of teaching children. "I'm sorry that I have to head off so abruptly, especially since we've only just started to get to know each other. But if I'm to get to town before dark, it's best I leave now." She stooped and picked up the books she needed for the coming day.

"That's a shame. I'm sure we would have had a lot to talk about." Both women walked out through the kitchen to where Katherine's wagon was tethered.

"If you find yourself out this way in the near future, Katherine, I'd really love it if you would call again. Maybe I could share some stories with you about Catriona."

Katherine was grateful her back was to Adele when those last words were spoken. She felt her features change to petulance, somewhat annoyed that Adele had taken her place in Catriona's household. She seated herself and reined in her emotions. "That would be wonderful. Although I don't think I'll be out here in the next week or so. Thank you for the offer all the same."

ADELE WAVED AS the wagon pulled away from her. She lowered her arm and frowned. "That was an interesting turn of events," she murmured. "I'm sure Susan didn't mention you had lived out here. And *why* hasn't Catriona said anything?" She headed back to the house wondering why Katherine was so nervous and uncomfortable in her presence.

AS KATHERINE NEARED the entrance to the property, she took stock of her meeting with Adele.

For all intents and purposes Adele was a lovely woman. Yet, despite this Katherine had a niggling feeling. Was it because she'd usurped Katherine's position? Or because she resented the fact that Catriona now had a guest and no longer needed her company? What makes me think I have sole ownership over Catriona? Those are selfish thoughts.

They're more than that, a voice inside her intoned. They're the words of a jealous woman. Angry at the stupidity of such introspection, she urged the horse into a canter, nearly causing it to collide with a rider coming toward her.

Catriona struggled to rein in her horse. "Slow down! You'll do yourself some damage, knock someone over or both."

"I'm sorry. I'm in a hurry to get home before dark and wasn't looking where I was going. How are you?"

Catriona finally managed to get her horse under control and reined in next to the wagon. "I'm not too bad. I'm keeping busy with the current crops and new planting at the moment. Between that and going into town there just aren't enough hours in the day."

Katherine made pretence of wiping dust from the front of her habit. "It must be a relief to have someone in the house then."

"Er, yes. Adele's visit was unplanned. I'm thankful for her company all the same."

Katherine tried to judge whether Catriona's last comment was related to her exit and dismissed the thought. "She's a lovely woman. She was your last governess, wasn't she?" Catriona nodded.

"It's a shame I had to leave so soon for I'm sure we could have found a number of things to talk about."

"I suppose so," Catriona noncommittally replied. "By the way, I was speaking with Susan this afternoon and she mentioned a wonderful idea. She suggested we all get together for a dinner party. I've organised the meal preparation side of things with Mrs. Johnston."

"That's a relief." Katherine smirked. "The idea of you serving steak and eggs to your guests is probably not what they had in mind for a dinner party."

"Thank you very much for your vote of confidence," Catriona humorously chided. "Will you come?" she asked, her tone somewhat subdued.

Katherine looked into Catriona's pleading eyes, and she reached across and gently touched Catriona's leg. "Of course I will. Just because I no longer live here doesn't mean we can't be friends." Despite her words, the feelings welling inside her at their sudden contact felt like something more than friendship. She removed her hand as inconspicuously as possible. "It'll give me an opportunity to get to know Adele."

Catriona sat back on her horse, suddenly distant. "I expect it will. Could you tell Susan I've scheduled the dinner to be next Friday--that's if it suits you all? If not then let me know and we'll arrange it for another time." Drawing the reins of her horse toward her, Catriona nodded and continued up the drive.

Katherine shook her head at Catriona's sudden distance and, at a loss to find a root cause for it, turned horse and wagon for home.

CATRIONA WASHED HER hands at the kitchen sink and gathered her thoughts. Having Katherine out for dinner had been a wonderful concept when Susan had raised the idea. But where did it leave her and Adele?

She sat and rested her chin on her hand. Am I chasing something I'll never have, when what I want is with me now? A soft pair of hands affectionately kneaded the knotted muscles of Catriona's shoulders.

Adele leant down and gently kissed her cheek. "Hello, stranger. You've been gone a fair while. I had a visitor while you were away."

Turning around, Catriona placed her hands on Adele's waist. Her hands traced a lazy path up to the fullness of Adele's breasts. Catriona pulled Adele to her and rested the side of her face on her soft stomach. She relished the feel of the smooth fabric on her skin. "I know. I saw Katherine on her way home."

Adele idly traced a pattern in Catriona's hair. "She's quite a nice woman, a bit nervous though. She acted surprised to find anyone out here. She mentioned you had told her all about us. I trust you weren't *altogether* candid about our relationship?"

Catriona raised her head. "Of course not. She's a nun for heaven's sake." She returned her face to the planes of Adele's stomach while her hands casually played with the ribbon on the back of Adele's skirt.

"Katherine said she used to live out here," Adele replied, her tone conversational. "Funny--I don't remember you mentioning it."

Catriona was glad for the concealment afforded by Adele's stomach, for she was suddenly afraid of what her eyes might betray. "She did, but the arrangement was only temporary. She now lives with Susan in town, and this gives her the freedom to tend to the families of the district without interference from the ladies' committee."

Adele's hands briefly stopped. "Strange--I thought she'd have been able to achieve the same out here."

Catriona removed her hands and stood up. "She did." She looked deeply into Adele's eyes. "But, she decided to move into town."

Adele glanced around the room, as if searching for a way to frame her next remark, then again settled her gaze on Catriona. "Was there anything between the two of you?"

Reticent to admit what had occurred, Catriona tried to answer as truthfully as possible. "We are close. But there'll never be anything more than a strong friendship. She's a nun, and I wouldn't jeopardise our friendship for something else."

Adele leant against the table and drew Catriona into her arms. "So, now she's living with Susan?" Catriona nodded. "Does she know about Susan?"

Catriona blinked. "I'm surprised. How did you know about Susan?"

"I know the difference between a cursory glance and the fine appraisal of another woman whose tastes are the same as mine. Let me say on the day of my arrival Susan's appraisal of me was very flattering."

Catriona threw her head back and laughed. "I can't wait to tell her she's been caught at her own game. She always reads me so well. It'll be ever so delicious to tell her she's been found out for once."

"I must say in her defence the assessment was reasonably mutual," Adele added, a twinkle in her eye. "She's an incredibly attractive woman."

"If that's the case you'll get a second look next Friday. She's coming out to dinner, as is Katherine. Be aware though, Susan's bringing her partner. I don't think *she'll* be as appreciative of your roving eye as Susan."

IN THE DAYS leading up to Friday, Katherine kept busy teaching the children on the farms surrounding the town. Fortunately, this left her insufficient time for the persistent ladies' committee or Father Cleary. She knew she should allocate her time more evenly. But as her stay in the town grew, her focus had shifted. She was well aware of her calling as a nun and that certain things were expected of her. Her habit was a daily reminder of the religious demands on her life. Despite these demands, in the precious moments when she had time to think, she questioned her initial decision to become a nun. Such thoughts haunted her and remained unresolved as she, Susan, and Me Lin left for the dinner party.

ARRIVING AT THE doorstep of Gleneagle, Katherine tried to recall the last time she'd been invited to such an evening. She sighed, remembering how long it had been and how things had changed since then. The group made its way up the stairs and were greeted at the door by Adele.

While the introductions were made, Katherine surreptitiously viewed Adele. Her black hair had been fashionably gathered into a chignon, raising it clear of her long slender neck. Her dress, with its gold hues dancing in the porch light, perfectly accentuated her figure.

She brought herself back to the present when she sensed Adele's gaze upon her. "Hello Adele. At least this time we haven't surprised each other. That's a lovely dress you're wearing," Katherine said, extremely conscious of her own drab attire.

"Thank you." Adele motioned them through the open door. "Why don't we go into the parlour? Catriona's checking on the meal."

"I don't mean to be rude," Katherine said, "but before we get too carried away with the evening's activities, would you mind if I gather some books from the study? It would be silly to waste an opportunity while I'm here not to pick up some more books."

"Certainly," Adele replied. "You know where the study is. Why don't you join us in the parlour when you're finished?"

Katherine continued down the hall, happy to have been given breathing space to gather her thoughts which, to say the least, were at war with one another. An irrational part of her mind kept insisting the role of hostess Adele was so capably filling should have been hers. Shaking her head in agitation, she raised the light on the trimmed lamp by the study door and went inside, grateful for the solitude.

"GOOD EVENING, LADIES," Catriona said as she made her way into the parlour. She took Me Lin's hand and gallantly placed a kiss on the back of it. "Me Lin, you bring light to what would otherwise be a dull occasion."

"I expect you radiate enough of that yourself-- sometimes more than you can handle." The group laughed, and Susan's eyes twinkled at her partner's repulse of Catriona's mock pass.

"Tonight should be a fine evening thanks to Mrs. Johnston's good cooking." Catriona poured herself a drink. "I must tell you, though, about something that occurred when I was organising for her to do the cooking. Susan, after speaking with you about the idea of a dinner, I decided to approach Robert Johnston, to see if his mother was available to cook for us tonight." Catriona turned to Adele. "He's the blacksmith's apprentice. When I went to speak with him, I found him in what could only be, by the body language of the two, a close conversation with the caretaker's son, William Gilchrist. When they heard me approach they both stepped clear of each other looking rather guilty as they did so."

Susan sipped a sherry. "It's funny you should say that. I've seen them together on a number of occasions and they certainly look like a lot more than just friends."

The group shared a knowing laugh. The door opened, admitting Katherine. "Who looked like more than friends?" Katherine glanced around the room. "What a lovely group for a dinner party. I'd almost forgotten what fashion looked like. Susan, I know I've said it already, but that blue silk dress would do any Irish drawing room justice. And Me Lin that maroon dress is beautiful. It matches you perfectly."

Me Lin tilted her head in acknowledgement. "Thank you. It took me quite a while to make both our dresses." She spared a glance at Susan. "But the effort was certainly worth the reward."

Catriona's breath caught when Katherine's gaze came to rest on her. She was pleased at the approving look she saw in Katherine's eyes. Despite Katherine's penetrating inspection, Catriona tried to remain as casual as possible.

"And look at you." Katherine slowly walked toward Catriona. "Your trousers and boots are just right for the occasion." She reached out as if to touch her shirt and then stopped, suddenly conscious of the other people in the room.

Catriona swallowed when Katherine's eyes lingered on the diamond pendant resting in the open V of her shirt.

"How are you ever going to keep that lovely cream silk shirt clean?"

Catriona was quietly flattered by Katherine's obvious pleasure at her attire. "Thank you for your vote of confidence. I must also thank Me Lin for making my trousers. It's not all that easy for a lady to walk into a tailor and ask for a pair of trousers, especially out here." The gathering shared a laugh. "As for your question regarding who looked more than merely friends--I don't think you've met them yet, so never mind. Can I offer you a watered-down whisky perhaps?"

"Miss Pelham, you must know, as a Celt, the only way I drink good scotch is in its purest state, not tainted by water." She grinned at Catriona's surprised look. "Since it's been quite a while since I took a 'wee dram', I'm going to have to refuse. If I didn't, then by the end of the night, between whisky and the wine with dinner, I believe I'd be a right royal mess."

Adele placed her glass down beside her and rose.

"Speaking of which, I think I'll check on the first course. It shouldn't be too long until it's ready to serve. If you'd make yourself comfortable for the moment, I'll let you know when it's ready."

Katherine also headed for the door. "Let me help you. Surely it's too big a job for one." Both women left, closing the door behind them.

Susan waited till their footfalls diminished and then turned to Catriona. "If you think that woman doesn't know what she wants, then you're wrong. Given what I've just witnessed I'd have to say there goes someone who has made up her mind. She just doesn't know how to ask for it."

THE PURE LINES of the dining room were of understated elegance dominated by a simple yet elegant red cedar table and matching hutch. As was the case throughout the house, Catriona's watercolours adorned the walls, their soft vistas visible by the light shed from three silver candelabras.

Dinner was a simple fare with an entrée of rabbit terrine, followed by Beef Wellington, which happened to be one of Katherine's favourite dishes. Accompanying the Wellington was a range of roast vegetables, suitably complemented by a couple of bottles of claret, which were Susan's contribution to the meal.

From her place at the head of the table, Catriona was the ever-attentive host, drawing Katherine into conversation when she fell quiet. In reality, Katherine preferred her silence. It gave her the opportunity to view the social interaction occurring around the room. She'd noted, when they entered, Catriona had walked ahead of Adele and herself to pull back their seats. Susan did the same for Me Lin.

Susan was very caring of Me Lin, and the looks between the two women, of comfort and happiness and an obvious commitment toward one other, surprised Katherine. Why hadn't she noticed their interplay earlier? Yet what they shared confused her. Was that the same as what she and Catriona had shared?

While sipping her claret, Katherine furtively viewed Catriona and Adele. There was closeness between them also. Yet it was slightly different from what she sensed between Susan and Me Lin. She searched her mind for words to compare the two and was at a loss. What wasn't lost on her were the frequent light touches Adele gave Catriona when she was emphasising a point or questioning Catriona whose mind, at times, was elsewhere. Those touches bespoke familiarity and comfort. Katherine missed those same such touches she'd shared with Catriona.

KATHERINE WASN'T THE only silent spectator. Adele scrutinised the looks that passed between Catriona and Katherine. No amount of shadows could hide Catriona's face when she teased Katherine or engaged her in conversation. Sitting beside Katherine made it difficult for Adele to clearly judge without being too obvious what Katherine's reactions were to Catriona's comments. The few times she managed to steal a glance proved enlightening. The way Katherine reacted to Catriona, as if drawing close and then suddenly retreating from their conversation, hinted at some sort of private struggle on Katherine's behalf.

THE DINNER DREW to a close and the party rose to adjourn. Katherine waved away Adele's attempts to gather the dessert plates. "It's only fair I help clear the table. Why don't you go into the parlour and I'll meet you there? I'll put these plates in water. If I don't, they'll be rock hard by morning."

"Like your scones I expect?" Catriona teased and she moved to help Katherine.

Susan took the plate out of the Catriona's hands, handed it to Katherine and made a shooing motion. "You three go into the parlour. I'll help Katherine with these." Susan picked up the jug of cream and the remains of a Mulberry pie. "Make sure there's a port waiting for me when we bring in the tea."

Susan placed the cream on the kitchen counter. "That was a most successful evening, don't you think?"

Preoccupied, Katherine put the crockery in the washbasin. "The evening was lovely, and made even more so by such nice company." Moving over to pour milk into the jug of the tea service she said as casually as possible, "I didn't realise how close you are with Me Lin. Between your busy schedules and her recent trip to Sydney, I think tonight was the first time I've actually seen the two of you relax together in the company of other friends. Catriona told me she came with you when you left the goldfields."

Susan busied herself with pouring a kettle of hot water over the bowls. "Yes, we're good friends, and we run a very successful business. With her seamstress skills and the way my work in the store provides for us, we have a nice income together. All in all it's a very comfortable arrangement." She placed the kettle back on the stove.

Katherine closed the distance between them. "Would you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Of course you can, and if I can answer it, I will," Susan replied as calmly as possible, her eyes never leaving Katherine's face.

Katherine searched Susan's face. "Are you and Me Lin lovers?"

Susan eyebrows raised and her mouth opened. A soft breath escaped Susan's mouth, as she looked toward the door and then back at Katherine. "Are you and Catriona lovers?"

Katherine stepped back as if she'd been slapped.

Susan held up her hands. "I'm sorry, Katherine. My last question was rude, presumptuous and entirely inappropriate." She took a seat. "I trust what I'm about to tell you won't be repeated, except perhaps to Catriona, as it would create great pain to both Me Lin and me. Yes, we are and have been together for some time." She finished and waited, as if bracing herself for a less than favourable reaction to her revelation.

Katherine pulled up a chair beside her. "How did you know? I mean, what happened for you to know you felt this way for each other?" she asked, desperate for simple answers to what was an infinitely complex proposition.

Susan unclasped her hands. "It's not an easy question to answer. You know I've been married and this provides a convenient cloak of respectability for me. Yet I was never happy with the arrangement. Somehow I felt there must be more to what existed between my husband and me.

"Not long after the death of Me Lin's husband, I persuaded my husband to employ her. I knew of her skill as a seamstress. She'd been a great help to many of the women on the goldfields. Her work as a seamstress was what she loved to do, but this wasn't all she did. She also took in laundry. My husband could see the financial return in such a venture. He agreed and, so, she worked under my supervision.

"In the quiet moments of the day we'd often sit and talk. When we were together, I felt a connection I'd never experienced. After my husband died and I decided to leave the goldfields, it seemed only natural that she accompany me. Over the months our friendship grew stronger. There was no great incident--moreso a gradual development and recognition of deeper feelings than those of merely friendship. One night she came to my room and has been there ever since." She lightly touched Katherine's chest with the tip of her finger. "The feeling comes from within, Katherine. No one else can tell you. It's how you feel."

Katherine creased her brows while she digested Susan's words. Looking up, she took Susan's hand and smiled. "Thank you for sharing your story. It's obviously something very personal for the two of you. Rest assured your secret will certainly not be discussed with anyone in town." Katherine looked at Susan's relieved face. "I expect your disclosure will make the, ah, night time arrangement between the two of you more amenable," she teased.

Susan furiously blushed. "You can't imagine how relieved I am you're happy to stay with us. We'd never do anything which would make you feel uncomfortable and cause you to leave."

Katherine softly laughed. "Don't you think I'm running out of places to stay? Besides, if I was to move out of the store, can you imagine what the reaction would be? If you're happy to have me stay, then I'm comfortable where I am. After all," she wistfully asked, "where else would I go?"

Susan placed her hand over Katherine's. "Is there anything you wish to speak with me about?"

Indecision clouded Katherine's features. She opened her mouth to reply and Adele and Catriona's laughter wafted through the house.

Katherine looked at the door and then back to Susan, her mask once again in place. "No, everything's fine. Though I think I've monopolised enough of your time. Why don't you take the tea in and I'll join you once I've put the salt and pepper tray away."

Susan nodded. "All right, but don't take too long or your tea will get cold."

As Susan left the kitchen, Katherine gathered a platter and an ornate lamp, and headed for the dining room. The light from the dining room's silver candelabras had long since been extinguished. Katherine worked silently by the warm glow, first removing the candles from their place and then returning the salt and pepper tray to its place within the hutch.

She finished her task, but instead of returning to the party, she took a seat at the now-vacant table. With her elbows resting on the red cedar, she cupped her head in her hands to consider how she really felt about Catriona. Was it the same feelings Susan had for Me Lin? She vigorously rubbed her face. That's not possible, she thought, after all I'm a nun.

Isn't that excuse wearing thin? A tiny voice inside of her challenged.

Running her hand through her hair she replayed the interaction between Catriona and Adele, realising there was more to their friendship than what she had first presumed. She struggled to comprehend how she felt about this development, and then the door to the dining room opened. Catriona entered and quietly closed the door behind her.

"What are you doing in here all by yourself?" She sat beside Katherine. "Haven't you enjoyed the party?"

With Catriona's arrival, Katherine felt some of her tension dissipate. "I've very much enjoyed myself and the dresses everyone wore. It's been a while since I've seen such lovely evening gowns. They were quite a sight." She looked at Catriona. "And you look resplendent in your blouse and trousers. It's a shame I made the evening dull with my habit," she finished self-consciously. She looked at her hands.

Catriona knelt beside her and tilted Katherine's chin to look into her eyes. "Beauty isn't made by someone's clothes, Katherine. They merely serve to complement it. Don't ever think you're not beautiful because of the habit you wear. It's what's underneath which makes you beautiful and how you feel about yourself." She took a breath and quietly added, "For what it's worth, you're very beautiful to me."

Katherine fell silent. She searched Catriona's face, surprised at what she found there. Reflected through the shadows, Catriona's expression seemed to show that she was undeniably hungry for the fleeting intimacy they'd shared together.

In comparison, Katherine remained indecisive about how she felt. She struggled but failed to conceal her turmoil. Only with a supreme effort was she able to break free from Catriona's hypnotic stare. "Oh my God," Katherine whispered, "please don't."

"I'm sorry. You know I'll never do anything to offend you either by words or by action."

Katherine barely held her emotions in check. "I know. It's just you ask too much."

"I ask for nothing you won't willingly give" she quietly said, stroking Katherine's arm as if to calm her. "If it means all we will ever have is friendship, then I'd settle for that rather than a lifetime without you."

"I need time to find my own way on this. I value what we have as well. Trust me when I say that was one of the main reasons I opted to live in with Susan and Me Lin. I needed the space to search myself over what happened, is happening between us, without being so close to a key object of my considerations. I wanted to be able to do this without the risk of endangering our friendship. I've no intention to stop visiting you unless you wish me to."

Before Catriona could say anything further, a shaft of light split the two. Standing in the doorway was Adele's silhouetted figure.

ADELE FELT LIKE an intruder, for she'd obviously walked in on something. If the proximity of the two wasn't an indication, the look on Catriona's face at her arrival was enough to seal it. Despite her best efforts, Catriona couldn't hide the shadow of guilt which flitted across her face. Keeping her emotions in check, Adele adopted a conversational tone. "I'm glad I found you both. Unfortunately, the wine has given Me Lin a headache, and Susan is keen to get her home."

BOTH WOMEN ROSE and made their way to the door. Katherine silently passed Adele, and out of the side of her eye caught the quizzical look Adele gave Catriona who, in turn, was doing her best to avoid Adele's gaze. Once goodbyes were exchanged Katherine, Susan, and Me Lin climbed into the buggy for their homeward journey. Try as she might, Katherine couldn't help but take one last look back to the house as they made their way down the driveway. Cast in the light of the doorway were Catriona and Adele. Just before the light gave way, Katherine saw Adele's arm possessively clasp Catriona's waist as they went inside.

Shocked, Katherine turned around, realising her disquiet was not a by-product of the intimate scene she'd witnessed. What disturbed her was the bolt of irrational jealousy surging through her on witnessing their familiarity with each another. Settling herself back in the buggy, she spent the return journey attempting to reconcile her undeniable feelings for Catriona, and what Katherine actually wanted out of life.

Chapter Fourteen

ADELE AWOKE THE following morning, her limbs still entwined with those of a somnolent Catriona. She looked at Catriona's peaceful features, her thoughts dwelling on the passion of their lovemaking. Adele had barely managed to close the door after farewelling their guests when Catriona pressed her against the door, her demanding lips desperately seeking her own. No exposed flesh was spared Catriona's passionate ministrations as she feasted on Adele's shoulders and half-clad breasts. The trail of discarded clothes from the front door to the bedroom bore testimony to their urgency. Despite immeasurably enjoying Catriona's desperate onslaught, Adele couldn't help but feel that Catriona's attentions were aimed toward someone else.

She cast her mind back to her intrusion in the dining room the previous evening. Even in the room's ambient light, it was plain to see that the friendship between Catriona and Katherine went beyond platonic, but how much more she wasn't quite sure. She'd been extremely conscious of Katherine's eyes on her during the dinner, as well as Katherine's interaction with Catriona. And, from the look of guilt on Catriona's face when she'd entered the dining room, Adele knew she hadn't been privy to the whole truth.

Catriona slowly began her ascent from sleep.

"Good morning, sleepy head. I didn't think you were ever going to wake up."

Catriona gracefully stretched her limbs and enclosed Adele in her arms. "It was a long night, don't you think?"

Lying in Catriona's arms, Adele knew this was where she wanted to be. But did Catriona want her?

Or was she merely a substitute? She gently extricated herself from the comfortable embrace and looked into Catriona's relaxed eyes. "I know I've asked you this, but I feel I need to do so again. Was there ever anything between you and Katherine?"

Catriona looked down at the space between them. "Nothing which was reciprocated."

Adele wanly smiled at Catriona's averted features. Reaching between them, she tilted Catriona's face up to her own. "I've been a governess all my life, and you were always one of my most intelligent students. Your capacity to use words to suit your own purposes is just as refined as I remember it to be. But a lie by omission is still a lie. Why don't you tell me what actually happened between the two of you?"

Adele's words held no malice, merely a need to know the truth. Releasing herself from Adele, Catriona relayed the events of Katherine's arrival up to what had occurred around the time of Alexander's death and until the present day. Adele sensed Catriona felt better for being able to unburden the emotional weight she'd carried since shortly after Katherine's arrival.

"Now you know it all. For all that's happened, nothing more can or *will* happen. Katherine's made that clear on a number of occasions now."

Adele gently stroked Catriona's face. "You know, living out here, doing what you do, gives you a maturity that's so much greater than your years. But my darling, in matters of the heart you're still a veritable babe in the woods. I've seen the two of you together, and I know what I saw in the dining room last night. Katherine may be in the grip of a great struggle, but trust me when I tell you, she *does* want you."

Catriona rolled away. "Why in the hell does everyone except Katherine keep telling me that? Why are you so sure?"

"You have a strange effect on people. After becoming your governess, I think I experienced a similar indecision to what Katherine's now feeling. I found myself in a daily struggle, trying to maintain a professional barrier from you, for fear of the possible ramifications of my actions." She wryly grinned. "In the end I proved to be woefully inadequate at keeping that distance.

"You might not have known it at the time, but inch by inch you broke down my defences. Your delicate touches, here and there, and your smile, with its ability to light a room. That day at the waterhole, I was so afraid I'd lost you when you almost drowned. Until you spoke, I had no idea of what your true feelings were for me.

"Times change though, and now you're in a similar situation to what I was with you. The key difference is you *know* how Katherine feels about you and, more importantly, how you feel about her." Adele searched Catriona's troubled blue eyes for any hint of denial.

"How can I want her when it's you I love?" Catriona challenged.

Adele gently shook Catriona's shoulder. "I know you do, and I love you beyond any measure of a doubt. But search your feelings. You love me, but you're not *in love* with me."

Adele placed her fingers on Catriona's lips, effectively halting her cry of protest.

"What we had, have is special. No one can take that away from either of us. No matter where I am, I'll always be there for you, if not in body then in spirit. But while I'm here you'll never have what you really want. And more to the point, Katherine won't come looking for it. It's why I need to tell you I've made up my mind to return to England."

The words once spoken couldn't be recovered and yet they hurt Adele far greater than they could have ever hurt Catriona. She'd been less than truthful with Catriona. The passion and the love she had for Catriona burned as brightly within her as it had done so many years ago. It would have

been easy for her to stay. She knew that in this strong and proud woman she'd found someone she could be truly happy with, but not if Catriona's true love now resided elsewhere.

Catriona closed her eyes. "Has this got something to do with my house manners?" she joked, in a transparent attempt to cover her hurt. "Why is it every woman I love decides to get up and leave me when things are going so well?"

"It's not so, and you know it. If I stayed we'd have wonderful times together. But for you, it would always mean having to settle for second best. When I left the first time I neglected to tell you one thing-- don't sacrifice your own happiness merely to suit the expectations of others. At least this time give yourself a chance to be truly happy. At the moment, that's something you can't achieve while I'm here. Don't mistake me--I'd happily stay. I fear though, after a time, you may grow to resent me for never giving you the opportunity to pursue what you truly want."

Catriona looked deeply into Adele's eyes as her own tears fell. "I don't deserve you and knowing that, I only hope for two things. I'll be eternally grateful if I get the opportunity to give Katherine half the love you've given me. And I hope the woman waiting for you in England knows how very lucky she is." She closed the distance between the two and for one final time, they tenderly made love.

BARELY A WEEK had passed since the dinner party and still Katherine found her thoughts returning to the evening. Tending the store one morning, the person who occupied her thoughts appeared.

Catriona walked through the door, took off her hat and ran her hands through her hair. She glanced around the shop as she approached the counter. "You *are* a woman of many talents. Not only are you a nun, teacher, and part-time healer, but you're now a storekeeper. Where's the proprietor on this fine day?"

Katherine bent down to return a jar of nails to their place below the counter. "She and Me Lin have gone on an outing. It's been a long time since they've both been able to have some time to themselves. I told them I'd look after the store if they could trust me to do so."

Katherine straightened and silently laughed at the look of astonishment on Catriona's face. Her eyes scanned the empty mercantile then returned to Catriona. "Don't tell me I've surprised the unflappable Catriona Pelham." Leaning across the counter, she gently patted Catriona's arm. "Susan told me about her and Me Lin. Surely you don't think me so self-righteous to condemn their happiness out of hand?"

"Not at all. It's just I'm amazed. I didn't expect such a reaction from you."

"I understand, from the perspective of the church, what they share can't be condoned. But as you've so rightly pointed out, sometimes things are not what they seem. Maybe I'm only now learning to fully understand that."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to sound like I was making fun of you." Catriona steered the conversation into smoother waters. "Did you enjoy the other night?"

"I did. And thank you for the invitation. It made a change to be in such good company. Adele is a lovely woman to talk with. Did she come with you today?" Katherine queried, busying herself with placing the lid back on a candy jar.

Catriona uneasily shifted from one foot to the other. "She did, but she's left for Sydney. Her trip out here was on an opportunity basis only. She has business dealings she must attend to in Sydney prior to returning to England."

She wandered to a far part of the store, lost in her thoughts. While their goodbyes at the stagecoach had been formal and stilted, their farewell at the homestead had been otherwise. Catriona's courage had again failed her, and she'd challenged Adele's decision to leave. Adele held her in her arms, reassuring her everything would turn out for the best. And, if it didn't, then maybe Catriona should take time out to visit her, in England.

Catriona was jolted back to the present by Katherine's proximity.

Katherine placed a hand on her shoulder. "Is everything all right?"

"I suppose so. It's just that I thought she might stay longer." Realising how her comments may have been interpreted, she hurried to add, "With the harvest occupying my day I barely have enough time to do everything. Coming home to good company and a cooked meal was a lovely way to end the day."

Katherine quickly pulled back her hand.

Again kicking herself at her thoughtlessness, Catriona continued. "At least I can look forward to your visits. Speaking of which, you've been conspicuously absent of late. When can I expect you to again grace the Pelham doorstep?"

"Most of my work for the next few days is on this side of town. On Thursday I'll need to pick up some more books from Gleneagle to take to the Connor clan. By all accounts they've about read their way through the last batch I gave them. From your home I'll head out to their farm. Then, when I'm finished, I'll come back and we can catch up on matters."

Catriona made a quick calculation. "By then I expect the harvesting will be finished and the crop under cover." She placed her hat on her head. "I look forward catching up with you."

Katherine made her way to the front of the store to open the door. "Thursday it is then. If you're not there when I come by to pick up the books, I'll leave you a note. I expect my return from the Connors will have me at your place around midday, just in time for lunch."

KATHERINE SET OUT early for the Connors, yet already the heat and humidity of the day made their presence felt. Not long after her arrival in town, Catriona had mentioned how hot the days became out here. Only now was Katherine truly beginning to understand. It wouldn't be so bad if only the days were hot. But sometimes the evenings were so terribly humid, she could barely sleep. Even Susan had commented on the heat and the ever-present clouds which, although promising rain, hadn't yet delivered it. Katherine gazed at the sky and then looked in the back of the wagon. "If you're going to rain today then I'd very much appreciate it, Lord, if you wait until I get home." Despite the continuous lectures from Catriona and Susan, she'd again forgotten a raincoat.

Arriving at Gleneagle, she was disappointed to find the house empty. Surmising Catriona was busy with the last of her harvest, Katherine didn't wait. Instead, she left a note advising her she still wished to have lunch together if she was not too busy. Remembering Catriona's predisposition to time, she made a quick mental calculation and indicated her return journey would have her at Gleneagle by twelve-thirty. She prominently placed the note in the centre of the kitchen table and set out for the Connor farm.

"ARE YOU THERE, Katherine?" Catriona called as she entered the back door to the kitchen. She looked down at the table and noticed a note. Unfolding the paper, she affectionately ran her fingers over the writing. Katherine's impeccable copperplate bore testimony to her many years of schooling. Catriona laughed out loud when she read the specifics of Katherine's return. Katherine had obviously learnt from her previous adventures and was making a light-hearted jab at her. She placed the note back down on the table and then washed her hands, finally relieved at seeing the last bale of wheat onto the bullock carts which would take it to town for overnight storage prior to its long journey to Sydney.

Catriona glanced at her fob watch and cringed when she thought of the next task she needed to complete. She had ample time to work on the farm's books until Katherine returned. Bookkeeping wasn't one of her strengths. Surprisingly, it had been Katherine who had displayed a true aptitude for the double entry bookkeeping required of a farm. Within days of her arrival, the farm's accounts had progressed from a series of debit and credit notes in the top drawer of the study to a pristine journal detailing receipts and expenditures. Catriona's shoulders slumped. Sadly she realised that Katherine's competency with the books might be yet another thing she could never again hope for. She trudged to the study and the stubs of paper awaiting her.

KATHERINE PULLED AWAY from the farewells of the Connor family and a light rain began to fall. She silently cursed herself for forgetting her raincoat, or as they were more correctly known in country Australia, her oilskin. She could only imagine what she was going to look like by the time she got to Gleneagle, not to mention what Catriona's reaction would be. She'd no doubt lecture her on why she was so hell bent on getting pneumonia, and then, disgusted, get towels to dry her with.

Katherine smiled. Despite Catriona's ranting and raving, she believed they both quietly enjoyed such exchanges, of which there had been so few of late. She was thankful Adele wouldn't be there to witness the tirade, for she felt the game was better played out between only them.

Driving down the track, her thoughts lingered on Adele's all too soon departure. This left Catriona again alone in a house far too big for merely one occupant. At least with the harvest she would again have the company of the other farmers. They promised her the day of Alexander's funeral that they'd help her, and they had proven true to their word.

Despite her best attempts, Katherine couldn't help but feel her heart skip a beat when Catriona had told her of Adele's departure. She sensed closeness between them, which she resented. When Adele had been there, she couldn't help but feel that her position in Catriona's life had been subordinated.

She reflected on the subtle shift in her friendship with Susan and Me Lin. Since Susan's disclosure, things had been more relaxed in the Crosier household. When she first arrived, after the evening meal Me Lin would make polite conversation and then retire. Now she sat with Susan, their hands lightly clasped when they spoke of the day's events.

Susan was an attentive listener, occasionally pausing to fetch Me Lin a cup of her treasured green tea, or to place a cushion under her feet, sore from a day's standing in front of laundry tubs. During these times, Katherine felt like a privileged spectator to their loving interaction. There was a gentleness and familiarity between them not dissimilar to what she and Catriona had shared. It was a closeness Katherine was missing and, indeed, she was missing the woman who she shared it with.

Katherine drew the wagon to a halt in the rain. What had she just thought and what did it mean? Casting her eyes around a softened landscape she sought an answer and found one coming from a quiet place deep within. I want what Susan and Me Lin have. I know I do. And what's more, I want the same sort of intense, comforting, and loving connection with Catriona that I currently witness every night between Me Lin and Susan. I can run from the truth, but it will still follow me. Isn't it about time I stopped running and turned around?

Katherine's tears mixed with the water dripping down her face. Regardless of all the religious excuses in the world, this *was* what she wanted. "I just hope it isn't too late to tell her." Feeling like a great weight had been lifted, Katherine urged the horse forward.

As she rounded a bend, a horse and rider skidded to a stop in front of her, and she stared into the eyes of the young bushranger, Joshua, the boy she'd helped that night, which now felt like an eternity ago. Despite his sudden intrusion, she refused to allow it to dampen her spirits.

"What is it about you people? Do you keep constant tabs on me or something?" She stopped, seeing something other than cockiness in his eyes. "What's wrong?" She leant forward to catch his reply over the noise of the downpour.

"We raided a homestead yesterday and it went horribly wrong. We were trying to make our escape when a posse of men were on us, and we had to fight our way out of there."

Katherine felt an uneasy feeling settle in her stomach. She struggled to remain calm. "What about injuries? Did you all manage to get away unscathed?" She tightly gripped the reins, somehow sensing what the answer would be.

"Three of us were killed." Joshua fought to steady his horse as lightning, closely followed by the sound of thunder, rolled not far from them. "Mary wasn't so lucky either. She's been badly wounded and has been asking for you ever since."

Katherine flinched at the thunder. "Where is she?"

"This way." Joshua wheeled his horse.

Any thoughts of a warm homecoming with Catriona were temporarily put on hold while Katherine followed.

AFTER AN INTERMINABLE period of bashing through virgin scrub, Katherine and Joshua finally emerged through a break in the bush. In the clearing was a grey upright slab hut, even more diminutive than the Connor's. Looking around the hut's general surrounds, Katherine noted a conspicuous absence of horses and activity. She alighted and turned to Joshua. "Where's the rest of your, er, gang?"

"Spread to the four winds." He tethered his horse to the closest tree. "As soon as they saw Mary's injury they split our gold between them and took off."

"So, there *is* no honour among thieves." Joshua's face whipped around in defiance and Katherine held up her hand. "Present company accepted of course."

They ran toward the hut, with Joshua opening the door to allow her to enter. He immediately closed it behind her, to keep out the unrelenting wind. Katherine's eyes adjusted to the low interior light and she saw a bed along the opposite wall with the figure of a pale woman lying on it.

Katherine hurried across and knelt beside the cot. "Oh Mary, what have you done?"

Mary's face lit up and she managed a weak smile. "I told him you'd come. He didn't believe me," she said, her breathing laboured. "All I needed was for him to find you."

"And here I am." Katherine's eyes travelled down to the bloodstained sheet concealing Mary's legs.

"The hit was one in a million. The bullet ricocheted off the pommel of my saddle and lodged in my thigh. Fortunately the constable and his men didn't follow us, and I had time to stop and tourniquet it before we got here." Her attempts at nonchalance were betrayed by the look of pain imprinted on her face.

Katherine pulled back the bloodstained sheet to get a better look at the wound, sucking in air through her teeth as she did so. "God in heaven, you don't do anything by halves." She was hard pressed to make out the source of the bleeding. "If you're going to survive this wound, we've got to get you into the back of the wagon and into town *now*."

Her attempt to rise was halted by Mary's restraining hand. "Why would I want to go all the way into town, have it tended to by a doctor and healed so they could hang me? Even if that were an option, you know I wouldn't do it. Besides, the wound's too far gone. I know it, and so do you. I've lost far too much blood to recover. It's only a matter of time," she finished gently, her voice tinged with a finality Katherine hadn't previously heard. "Before I go to wherever it is I'm going, I had to speak to you and clear the air between us."

"Let me at least first look at the wound and clean it."

Mary settled back on the bed and, fatigue etching her face, nodded her head.

Attempting to get a better look at the injury, Katherine used a knife to quickly tear the trouser leg away. Finally being able to see the full extent of the damage, she knew Mary's words to be true. The wound was high up on the thigh and, despite the tourniquet, still oozed blood. The flesh immediately surrounding the wound was reddened, the telltale purulent smell of decay cloyingly evident.

"Your leg's infected already." Katherine rose, opened the door, and thrust two pots into Joshua's hands.

"I need you to fill these with rainwater and bring them back inside so I can heat them on the fire."

Katherine returned to Mary's side. She tore the discarded trouser leg into strips with which to dress the wound. She was vaguely aware of the door opening and Joshua putting a pot on the fire, and then they were once again left alone.

When the water was warm enough, Katherine cleaned the wound as best she could.

She looked around the room. "Where's your food?"

Mary motioned to the corner of the hut. "Over there, she managed through gritted teeth. "What's left of it."

Katherine rifled through the bags until she found two calico pouches containing tea and sugar. Portioning the tea between two cups, she poured the remainder of the water into both, and then

liberally sprinkled sugar into Mary's. Dragging a chair across the room, Katherine sat beside her and handed Mary a cup of strong black tea.

"Thank you." Mary took a sip. Her eyes temporarily closed and a ghost of a smile graced her face. She handed the cup to Katherine and eased herself back onto the bed. "I've no right to demand your help, especially after the way I behaved when we last met. I should never have intruded on you like I did. On top of that, my questions in the kitchen were rude and inappropriate."

Katherine gently stroked Mary's arm. "No, they weren't. You were right. Something had occurred between Catriona and me. For so long I'd been denying that anything had happened. On that morning when you visited, your questions were too close to the mark."

"I thought as much by the way you reacted, as well as what I'd heard about her actions on your safe return after the first time you, er, visited me. In truth, I was jealous at what the two of you had. She obviously cares for you very deeply."

Katherine mutely nodded, her hands tightly clasped in her lap.

Mary gently covered her petite hands. "You and I both know I'm dying, so now's not the time to mince words. I'm going to be honest with you. Can I expect the same in return?"

Katherine looked first to the hand resting over her own clenched fist and then to Mary's pale features. Unclenching her hand, she turned it up to gently clasp Mary's own. "Yes."

"I've been around lovely women all my life, from casual liaisons to the look of hopeful expectation in rich grazier's wives who I've divested of money. By far, you're the most beautiful woman I've ever known. Your beauty is not skin-deep. It's also within. God knows any man, or *woman* for that matter, would risk life to win just one smile from you. No matter how well you hide your beauty behind your habit, it won't be hidden from anyone."

Katherine blushed at Mary's candid comments and a familiar fire ignited itself in her stomach.

"Every time I'm close to you I sense energy between us which is almost palpable. I felt it the night when we argued by the fire and again in the kitchen when I held you, and I sense it radiating from you now. Katherine, do you not feel the same force between us?"

Katherine's eyes alternated between Mary's face and her hands. "I do, and it confused me at first. Prior to coming to Australia, I'd never been exposed to such feelings. Then suddenly both you and Catriona evoked the same reaction." She took a shuddering breath. "That day in the kitchen when you held me----I thought you were going to kiss me. I was afraid, but I was also excited. Then, after you left, all I felt was ashamed," she finished, relieved to speak to someone about that morning, yet guilty at the same time. She turned her head away from Mary's probing eyes.

Mary eased herself up on her elbow and tenderly captured Katherine's face. "What you felt were your own emotions, Katherine. And they're powerful ones which won't be constrained by social

or religious mores, no matter how hard you try. You didn't need to be afraid of me that day. I never would have hurt you."

Mary's hand wound its way to the back of Katherine's neck. "Let me show you," she said huskily and guided Katherine's face to her own.

She had barely touched Mary's lips when Katherine felt like a lightning bolt had passed through her. Leaning into the kiss, she trembled at the feel of Mary's tongue lightly teasing her upper lip as if in question. In answer, Katherine lips slightly parted to allow the gentle exploration of Mary's tongue.

Finally, Mary broke contact and eased herself back onto her pillows. Uncontrolled tears tracked down her face.

Confused, Katherine reached for Mary's hand. "Are you all right? Are you in pain?"

Mary bitterly laughed. "I am, but it's pain of the heart I suffer. Life is cruel, Katherine. I've waited to be able to do that to you since we first met, and now it's too late. I once told you I could have never changed my ways. I'd have gladly given up bushranging though, to spend my life with someone as beautiful as you. Now it's too late--but it's *not* for you. Things can be different. Promise me you won't wait. Admit to what you want and take it."

Katherine looked down at Mary's pleading eyes. "I will. Now please rest for a while and conserve your strength."

Mary's eyes closed, the shallow breathing of her chest barely visible. As the rain fell outside Katherine shed her own silent tears for a woman whose life was almost over when it had barely begun.

CATRIONA CAST A disgusted glance at her attempts to maintain a halfway decent set of books. Katherine's last neat entries were such a contrast to hers. Catriona's writing looked like a cat had dipped its paws in ink and walked across the page.

Seeking any excuse to break away from the tedium, she glanced at the clock and frowned. It was two-o'clock. Katherine should have arrived by now. Although concerned by her tardiness, what unsettled Catriona more was unrelenting rain on the homestead's corrugated roof. If Katherine stayed true to form, then she'd have forgotten her oilskin. Catriona shivered. Despite the earlier heat of the day, a rainstorm could quickly chill a person to the bone. She pushed herself out of her chair and strode toward the barn, on the way grabbing her hat and two oilskins.

As she rode toward the Connor property, her concern grew. The deluge was falling in steady sheets, making it almost impossible to see the muddied track in front of her. At one stage her horse temporarily lost its footing, and she only regained control through luck and skilled horsemanship. Catriona reached forward and reassuringly patted her horse's neck. Anyone in a

wagon would have been hard pressed to recover from that. All she could hope was that Katherine had displayed the sense to wait out the storm with the Connor family.

A dripping Catriona knocked hard on the door to the hut, only to have it opened by Aiden, the Connor's youngest boy. He stepped aside and Catriona entered, surprising Mrs. Connor.

"Miss Pelham, 'tis foul weather to be out riding." She motioned to a chair. "What can I do for you?"

Catriona politely shook her head. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm looking for Sister Flynn. She left me a note saying she was visiting you and that she'd return via Gleneagle at around twelve-thirty, for lunch. She hasn't turned up. I didn't pass her on the road and now it's getting on late afternoon. Have you seen her?" Apprehension seeped through Catriona's being.

"She left here just after eleven, my dear," Mrs. Connor said seeking confirmation from her eldest. "I wonder where she's gotten to?"

Chapter Fifteen

KATHERINE SPENT AN hour trying valiantly to stem the life force which slowly seeped from Mary's body. The trouser leg she'd stripped and used for bandages was now blood-soaked. Katherine knew, regardless of her efforts, Mary wouldn't last the afternoon.

She was unsure whether the loss of blood or onset of infection was the catalyst, but Mary alternated between calm and delirium. At times the words flowing from her told of one of Mary's more successful bushranging escapades. Occasionally her eyes would open and she would sit up, urging this man or another onto greater feats of daring. When this happened, Katherine carefully eased her down onto the cot and, for a fleeting period of time, Mary was once again at peace.

After a prolonged silent interlude, Mary opened her eyes and, she reached for Katherine's hand. "Thank you for coming and helping me this afternoon," she said with surprising clarity. She laughed humourlessly. "Even most of my *loyal* followers didn't hang around till the end."

Katherine tried to comfort her, but Mary gently batted her hand away. "It's all right. I always thought it would end like this. I'm glad you came." She closed her eyes, her face a concentration of effort. "It's time for me to move on."

"Lay back and conserve your strength. You need all the rest you can get if you're to get better."

"You make a great helper, darling, but a woeful liar. I've got to go, and we both know it. Know that, if things had been different, I'd have loved you with all my heart. Please go before I die. Joshua knows what has to be done."

"Let me stay. I've seen death." Katherine gently chided. "Do you think I'm afraid of it?"

"No, my love, it's not you I'm afraid of. It's me and my actions. I want you to remember me as I was, not with a face contorted by fear. Please, I beg of you, go now." Exhausted, she fell back onto the cot.

A steady flow of tears streamed down Katherine's cheeks as she leaned to kiss Mary. "I'll never forget you," she whispered, her voice hoarse. "I'll remember your pride, stubbornness, bravery, and courage. Most of all, I'll remember the love you had for your people and your kindness towards those less fortunate. I'll always cherish that." Leaving her bedside vigil before separation became too much to bear, Katherine made her way to the door of the cabin. With one last look at Mary, she opened the door and stepped outside.

Joshua was where he had sat all afternoon, on the bench on the undersized front verandah, out of the rain. "Mary hasn't got long before." She let the words hang between them. "She told me you have instructions?"

Joshua silently nodded.

"I can help you if you like. There'll be things which need to be done to prepare her--"

Joshua held up his hand. "I'm sorry, Sister, but I have my orders. Mary was adamant you weren't to be here when she died. I was to show you to the main road and send you on your way. She made me swear I would, and it's a promise I'll not break. If you'll wait here, I'll bring your wagon around."

Katherine nodded, suddenly mute and feeling terribly disempowered. To go against Mary's wishes would be wrong. Yet every element of her willpower warred with her not to do just that. Stepping into the rain and up onto the wagon, she followed her guide back to the main road.

The force of the rain made it almost impossible for Katherine to see the road in front of her, and she shivered as a steady stream of water trickled between her shoulder blades. "How m-m-many times do you n-n-need to be told to take a darned oilskin raincoat with you when y-y-you visit?" Her teeth chattered uncontrollably and her hands were numb. She urged the horse onward.

She struggled on, her thoughts dominated by the events of the past few hours. The wagon suddenly lost its purchase on the slippery road and lurched. She slid sideways across the seat, barely managing to maintain a grip on the reins. By the narrowest of margins, she brought the buckboard to a halt. She jumped down to see if any damage had been done. Her feet sank into the quagmire that had once formed the road. Trudging around the side of the cart, she angrily shook her head. The wheel pin was dislodged. The rear wheel was more off than on. Katherine

grabbed hold of the wet, muddy round object and struggled to force it back in place. Try as she might, it wouldn't budge in the sticky mud.

With a shivering look of disgust, she walked toward the horse. "I'll have to ride you bareback. At least that's better than perishing in this cold."

She got closer to the beast and let out an anguished cry. He was balancing the greater amount of his weight on three legs and, despite her gentle coaxing, wouldn't put any weight on the fourth. "I don't believe this." She stomped her foot, only to have mud spatter up the front of her habit. Laughing through chattering teeth at the picture she must be presenting, Katherine began the slow walk home.

MRS. CONNOR HAD barely finished her sentence and Catriona was out the door and on her horse. She galloped away from the home and back from where she'd come. Where had Katherine gone? A sudden thought dawned on her. Wasn't it somewhere nearby that the bushrangers had kidnapped her? Had that happened again? If so, she hoped she'd at least be out of the bloody rain.

As her horse precariously negotiated its way around the next bend, Catriona froze. Sitting off to one side of the road was the horse and wagon used by Katherine, who was nowhere to be seen. "That wasn't here last time I passed by. Where are you?" she called out.

Catriona angled her horse to the side of the wagon and leant down, immediately recognising the extent of the damage.

She examined Katherine's horse. One of its forefeet barely touched the road. Catriona quickly unharnessed the animal and ran an expert hand down the lame leg. She gently coaxed its hoof off the ground. Deeply embedded in the centre was a sharp white piece of quartzite, a stone which regularly plagued horses in these parts. She carefully extracted the piece with her knife, and then allowed the beast to test its weight on the now unencumbered foot. She nodded. "There you go." Catriona remounted. "Once you feel a bit better I've no doubt you'll find your way back to Susan and a nice warm stable."

Catriona's mild concern for Katherine's safety was now growing to full-blown fear. Urging her horse into as much speed as she dared, she rode through the unrelenting rain, all the while struggling with the state of the liquid road.

Rounding a bend, her face changed from a study of concentration to one of shock. Staggering along the road under the weight of her habit was Katherine.

Catriona reined in her horse and leapt from her saddle. "My God," Catriona yelled over the sound of the rain, "are you all right? You're drenched."

Catriona grabbed Katherine and spun her around. Her heart turned to ice at what she saw. Katherine's eyes were glazed as if in sleep, her lips already tinged blue. She looked like Catriona

had when she was a child and fell into one of the dams in the middle of winter. If it hadn't been for her father, she might have died. Despite the current situation, Catriona couldn't help but smile at the way her father teased her for years after about how blue lips never did suit her.

She gently shook Katherine.

Katherine's eyes took on a fuzzy focus as she blinked at Catriona. "C-c-c-cold," was all she could manage.

Pulling the other oilskin from her saddlebag, Catriona wrapped it around Katherine's shivering form. After a fair degree of manoeuvring, she managed to get them both on her horse and turn the animal for home. The hard riding she'd already done, combined with the added weight, made the return trip painfully slow. By the time they arrived at Gleneagle, Katherine had progressed from cold to delirium.

Wasting no time, Catriona managed to halt her horse near the kitchen entrance. She dismounted and softly elbowed the horse.

"Off you go, old feller. You know where the stable is."

With Katherine in her arms, she took the stairs two at a time. Kicking the door open with her foot, she carried Katherine to her old room. She placed her in a chair, then tore the top bedcover off the bed and swaddled Katherine in it.

She bit the inside of her lip trying to remember how her father had saved her when she fell into the dam. Suddenly it came to her. He got her out of the wet clothes and stayed with her until she was warm. That *must* be the key.

Catriona unwrapped Katherine from the bedcover and looked at her habit. She pulled her out of the chair and turned her around, looking for buttons which would identify a way to disrobe her. "This is like unravelling a puzzle," she grumbled, her concern mounting at Katherine's continually shivering form. "There's more than one way to skin a cat, or nun. I'll have another one made--I promise."

Catriona pulled her pocketknife from her trousers. She cut and then tore the front of the dress from neck to waist and literally peeled Katherine from her habit and drenched undergarments. She picked up the bedspread from the floor and roughly dried Katherine's wet form, to kick-start her circulation. Satisfied she was at least warmer than what she'd been, she carried Katherine to bed and lay her down. After stoking the room's fire, she went in search of more blankets.

Her bedside vigil went on through the night. She left her only long enough to unsaddle her horse, and change out of her own wet clothes into a dressing gown. It would do no good to have her stabilise Katherine only to have *herself* fall ill. Catriona spent the rest of her night seated by Katherine, gradually peeling off blankets as her condition improved. Despite her best efforts to stay awake, sometime in the early hours of the morning, Catriona too drifted off to sleep.

KATHERINE ABRUPTLY WOKE, aware of well-known, yet most recently unfamiliar, surroundings. As she roused herself, the events of the previous day came flooding back. She could recall, fairly well, to the point when she'd been stranded by a lame horse and broken wagon. From then on, her memories were like scenes on post cards--captured moments in time.

She had snatches of a memory involving Catriona finding her and then carrying her through the house. She also remembered Catriona coming at her with a knife and a ripping sound. Glancing at the black and white heap in the corner of her room, she realised she had been physically extracted from her habit. She creased her forehead and trailed a tentative hand across her body to discover she'd also lost her undergarments.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed a shape. Turning her head ever so slightly, she saw Catriona asleep in a chair by her bed, her head lolling forward. Clothed in a dressing gown, which reminded Katherine of one of her father's, she looked like she'd been there for quite a while. Her memories came flooding back, and Katherine recalled Catriona's presence throughout the night, at various times removing blankets from her, while forcing her to stay in bed. She must be worn out. At least she's now getting some well-needed sleep. Katherine languished in bed, content to look at Catriona all day if she could.

Catriona's face was a study of tranquillity, making her appear younger than her years. Her face was at peace, bereft of the bitterness around her mouth and her all-to-often creased forehead. Katherine's thoughts drifted to the previous day, and what she'd finally admitted--feelings she'd secretly harboured and railed against for so long.

Catriona's head jerked uncomfortably forward, and she awoke. She grabbed on to the sides of her chair for stability and then blinked twice, as if taking her bearings. She looked at the bed and Katherine's inquisitive eyes.

"How are you?" She scrubbed her face with her hands as if to shake off her sleep. "You had me worried last night. At one stage you were a shade of blue."

Katherine smiled at Catriona's concern. "I feel fine, considering what I can remember going through. But the horse and wagon--they're still out there. I think the horse's leg is broken."

Catriona placed a reassuring hand on Katherine's arm. "I wouldn't worry if I were you. The wagon will need to be fixed, but the horse just had a piece of quartz lodged in his hoof, which I took out. I've no doubt once he allowed some time for the pain to subside, he headed for his stable at Susan's store. I'd be surprised if he's not there now, demanding his oats."

Catriona's attention strayed to the pile of what were now rags and back to Katherine. "I think you should be more concerned about yourself. I couldn't get you out of your damned habit last night. I swear you must lock yourself in it every day. I had to cut you out of it. I'm sorry. I'll get you a new one."

"You don't owe me anything," Katherine replied, her eyes locked with Catriona's pools of blue. "If it hadn't been for you, I'd have probably died last night. I'm sure you had good reason for any action you took."

As if embarrassed, Catriona nervously cleared her throat and stood. "I'm sure you must be hungry after what you've been through. Why don't I fix us both some breakfast?"

Katherine captured Catriona's hand. She looked down, questioningly, at Katherine.

"I need to tell you something." Katherine took a deep breath. "I've made a decision."

Keeping a firm hold on Catriona, Katherine sat up, conscious of the bedclothes pooling around her waist. Catriona was glued to the spot, her eyes alternating between Katherine's face and her alabaster form.

Reaching forth with her free hand, Katherine took hold of the belt keeping Catriona's dressing gown closed. After slight resistance it gave way, revealing a break in the cloth and the beauty concealed inside. Catriona shrugged her shoulders and the robe fell to the floor.

Katherine bit back a gasp as her eyes lingered on Catriona. Her narrow waist served to accentuate her delicate yet curved breasts and toned body. Katherine pulled back the bedcovers and shyly scooted across the bed, silently inviting Catriona to join her.

Catriona sat on the bed. "Are you sure?"

Katherine pulled Catriona down to her. "I've never been so sure of anything in my life."

Catriona shook her head, her eyes filled with wonder.

"What is it?" Katherine asked.

"I can't believe I'm finally here beside the woman I love."

She lightly brushed away a tear from Catriona's eye. "I couldn't think of any place I'd rather be."

Katherine eyes fluttered closed when Catriona lips met hers. Catriona's soft touch ignited a spark, and the passion they had concealed from each other for so long was set afire. Catriona began a sensuous assault on Katherine's mouth. Her fingers played their way down Katherine's back, coming to rest on Katherine's backside.

Katherine's breath hitched and she broke free of their kiss. "The first time you touched me like that I thought I was on fire." She softly pressed a kiss to Catriona's collarbone. "All I knew is that I wanted so much more."

"You can have it all." Catriona pulled Katherine to her, reclaiming her lips with her own.

Catriona's lips parted and Katherine's tongue lightly touched Catriona's. Catriona moaned. Katherine's delicate hands charted their own course along the muscles of Catriona's back.

"Oh my God," Catriona said as she broke their kiss. "For a celibate woman, you have an uncanny knack of knowing what excites me."

"I'm glad, because I *really* have no idea of what I'm doing. It just feels--right."

"It's *very* right." Catriona eased Katherine on to her back. She traced a lazy line up Katherine's side, until her fingers came into contact with the outer fullness of Katherine's breast. Deliberately avoiding their more sensitive centre, Catriona gently stroked her breast--her fingers teasing and barely touching the outer reaches of her tender pebbled flesh.

Where Catriona touched her tingled, as if her skin retained a permanent imprint of the intimate contact. Katherine attempted to chase Catriona's hand, growling when she removed it.

"Catriona." Katherine failed to keep the desperation out of her voice.

"You never were very patient, were you? Trust me, all good things come to those who wait." With a smile, Catriona lowered her head and trailed a path of kisses down Katherine's throat to her breast. She lightly touched the erect nipple with her tongue, barely allowing her lips to touch Katherine's skin.

Katherine moaned and arched her body, desperately attempting to heighten the sensation of Catriona's busy lips.

"Oh, yes," she hissed when, finally, Catriona's mouth closed around her eager nipple. Katherine couldn't believe the wonderful sensations coursing through her. Her body instinctively reacted, and she shuddered with desire at the feel of Catriona's tongue and teeth grazing her nipple. Eager to maximise the contact, she laced her hands in Catriona's hair and drew her head to her breast.

Katherine lightly tugged Catriona's hair, while Catriona nuzzled her way across to her chest. She softly raked Katherine's breast with her teeth, and lightly blew on it and raked it again.

Just when Katherine thought the sensations inside her had reached their pinnacle, her body began a slow burn. Catriona's hand weaved its way down her body drawing feather light circles on her stomach and then finding the sensitive crease of skin where leg meets hip. Strumming the delicate skin with her fingers, Catriona teasingly encroached on the outer regions of Katherine's hair then slowly retraced her way to the safer ground of her hips.

"Oh God, please, Catriona, please!" Katherine cried, unsure of what she was asking for, yet seeking deliverance from the exquisite tension she was experiencing.

Catriona laughed with pleasure. She brushed her hand over Katherine's mound and rested her hand on the inside of Katherine's thigh. With a deeper primal sexual instinct, Katherine parted her legs. Catriona's fingers trailed ever so slightly over her lips, and Katherine raised her legs, opening herself to her.

Catriona's fingers parted her soft folds of flesh, and Katherine shuddered. She looked down to where Catriona rested her head against her chest.

"Oh, my darling you are so ready," Catriona said. Fingers lingering in Katherine's wetness, she raised her head and possessively kissed her.

Katherine couldn't believe the pleasure she was feeling. Wherever Catriona touched, her skin burned. What had started as butterflies in her stomach had now progressed to a horde of stampeding elephants. With a will of their own, her hips moved in concert with Catriona's stroking. Her fingers beat a relentless tattoo in Katherine's readiness, her tongue languished in Katherine's mouth.

Catriona broke away from their kiss, cerulean eyes locked with emerald pools of desire. "Trust me," Catriona entreated.

"Trust you," Katherine managed, her breathing ragged, "with my life." She passionately claimed Catriona's lips with her own.

Katherine felt a fleeting resistance, followed by slight pain when Catriona entered her. The pain was quickly forgotten. Catriona's fingers moved inside her and she arched her hips in time with Catriona's beat. Catriona's thumb delicately stroked her bud and she released a guttural cry.

On sensory overload, Katherine could no longer focus. Her passion continued to mount. Her body disassociated itself from her mind. Her hips thrust faster with Catriona's frenzied caresses. She was vaguely conscious that the voice urging Catriona on was her own. Then, as if breaking through an invisible barrier, Katherine shuddered uncontrollably. Screaming out Catriona's name, she held Catriona's head to her breast, twitching as she slowly regained control over her body.

Catriona slowed her ministrations, and Katherine lay back on the bed and wiped her face. Catriona's breathing was ragged, her face aglow.

Katherine cupped Catriona's face in her hand. Her thumb stroked the soft fuzz on her cheek. "If someone had tried to explain to me what just happened between us, I wouldn't have believed them. I don't think I've ever experienced anything so, so passionate and frenzied, and yet so beautiful." Uncontrolled tears welled in her eyes. "Thank you," she said and embraced Catriona.

For Catriona the moment was almost too much to bear. Resting in Katherine's arms, she felt her own tears begin when she realised how long she had waited to openly love Katherine. Thinking back to her recent rekindling of her relationship with Adele, she could find no comparison. She wanted to be here with Katherine--now and always.

Katherine cleared her throat and wiped her eyes. "Never in my imagination would I have thought loving you was like this." She sniffled. "And I do love you. I know I hid it for so long behind religion, society, propriety and any number of convenient excuses. But when I saw Susan and Me Lin together, at last I realised how special my feelings for you are."

Catriona laughed and brushed a stray hair from Katherine's face. "I think I've loved you from the moment I set eyes on you, all dusty as you were, at the train station. You frustrated me at first with your anger and your pride. I later realised that was what made me so desperately want you." She searched Katherine's face, taking in every element of beauty captured there. Earnestly looking into her emerald eyes, she was exposed to the love Katherine held within. "Be my partner, Katherine, and I promise you my love, my friendship, my home, and my security for as long as I live."

Katherine let her actions speak for themselves. She took Catriona's face in her hands and kissed her deeply. Her fingers lightly drew patterns over Catriona's stomach and then trailed a line up to her breasts. Using her open palms, she made miniature circles over Catriona's breasts, delighted in their response to her touch.

Katherine lowered her head until her tongue barely met Catriona's excited nipple. She brushed it lightly with her teeth. Catriona gasped. "Do you like that?"

"A little harder," Catriona said. She guided Katherine's head to where it had previously been.

Katherine alternated between sucking and gently biting Catriona's nipple, pleased at Catriona's reaction. As one nipple hardened, she kissed and nipped her way across Catriona's chest, applying the same attention to her other breast.

"Oh God, like that, just like that." Catriona entangled her hands in Katherine's hair.

Recalling how Catriona's hands had traversed her body, Katherine began an assault of her own. Her fingers lingered in Catriona's wet heat. "You're so very wet."

"Only for you."

Katherine stilled her hand over Catriona's passion. A throbbing heat pulsed beneath her fingers. Catriona covered her hand with her own, and gently guided her to the sensitive font of her pleasure.

Taking her lead from the experienced hand enveloping hers, Katherine gently stroked the bud, occasionally dipping into Catriona's passion. Her hand rapidly developed a rhythm to match Catriona's thrusting hips.

Somehow realising Catriona craved deeper contact, Katherine's fingers tentatively teased Catriona's opening.

"Inside," Catriona hissed. "I need you to fill me."

With two fingers, Katherine entered her to Catriona's emphatic yes. Katherine used her thumb, teasing the bundle of nerves and elevating Catriona to greater heights of passion.

Katherine watched the heavy lidded eyes of her lover. She heard Catriona's breathing deepen. Suddenly her body stiffened, then crested in sensual waves of passion. As her hips slowed, Catriona stilled Katherine's hands.

Katherine nuzzled Catriona's chest while Catriona's hand idly stroked Katherine's hair.

Catriona kissed the top of her head. "My love, no one has ever made me feel so complete. It scares the hell out of me when I think how close I came to losing you last night."

"You didn't, and for that I'm eternally grateful."

Catriona frowned, as if she were working through something.

"What is it?"

"I'm doing the sums here, and I can't get last night to add up. You left the Connors, but Mrs. Connor said you were gone hours before I arrived at her farm."

Katherine nodded.

"I didn't pass you on the way out. But I found you on my return journey, not all that far from the Connor property. What happened?"

Katherine pulled away and searched Catriona's features. "I was on my way home when one of the bushrangers--"

Catriona sat up in bed. "What the hell do they think they're doing? They've got no right to prey on anyone who travels that road."

Katherine placed her fingers on Catriona's lips. "Let me explain." Catriona petulantly nodded. Katherine collected her thoughts in an attempt to try to piece together her story. "The gang was involved in a botched robbery two days ago. In the process, some of the gang were killed and Mary, the leader, was seriously wounded. I couldn't refuse to help her." Her voice trailed off and she turned away from Catriona.

Catriona gently guided Katherine face back to her. "What is it? Did something happen out there?"

"Yes. No," she added at Catriona's look of surprise. "Before you say any more, please let me tell you from the beginning. When I was captured by the bushrangers and first met Mary, I knew something wasn't right. I couldn't put my finger on it. She made me feel, well--strange, scared, and exhilarated all in the same moment. I had no idea of what was going on with me. As we sat and spoke she told me of--of her love for women." She smiled when she remembered her outburst.

"I told her thoughts and actions like hers were unnatural, and women shouldn't live together in such a fashion. She then challenged me over our living arrangement and I was outraged. Yet at the same time, I couldn't help but wonder how other people saw us. The moment passed between Mary and me, and the next day I was allowed to leave.

"Do you remember our argument in the study, when I returned? When you touched me, I felt the same sensations Mary had stirred in me. I found myself wondering if there was substance to what Mary said. It confused me. I didn't know what to do or who I could speak to. So I hid the feelings deep down, hoping they'd pass.

"Not long after Alexander's death and *that* morning between us, Mary visited the homestead. Again she challenged me on how I felt, and it scared me so much. It's why I moved in with Susan and Me Lin. I didn't know what to do and I thought some distance between us might put the whole issue in better perspective." Katherine shook her head. "I shouldn't have bothered. Every time I visited you the feelings were still there. Then, at the dinner party, I think I started to see things a lot more clearly. I had every intention of speaking with you about it yesterday, until I was waylaid by a bushranger." Katherine shifted uncomfortably. "Mary and I spoke yesterday and she told me how she felt for me. We, that is, I kissed her."

Catriona failed to conceal the look of hurt that crossed her face. "Do you love her?"

"No! I don't love her, although I think she had strong feelings for me. The kiss, it felt natural given the circumstances."

Catriona's thoughts raced like a team of wild brumbies. She closed her eyes and centred herself, then returned her gaze to Katherine. "What sort of situation would have precipitated you kissing a bushranger?" Try as she might she couldn't keep the anger out of her voice.

Katherine took Catriona's hand and placed a kiss in the upturned palm. "She was dying, and her final words were about how she felt for me. We kissed and she told me not to wait too long to find in life what I wanted. You see, she was sending me to you. Please understand when I say what I felt for Mary is nothing compared to the love I have for you." Katherine lowered her head and began to cry.

Catriona drew her into her arms. "I'm sorry she had to die, but she knew the chances a bushranger takes. You know that, don't you?" Katherine nodded against her chest. "Between Mary and me, your life over the past weeks couldn't have been easy."

Katherine raised her head. "It hasn't, but I can honestly say the outcome is more than I could have ever wished for."

Moving out of Catriona's embrace, Katherine's face adopted a pensive expression. "Can I ask you a question?"

"My love, of course you can--anything you wish."

"Were you and Adele lovers? Is it why your mother originally told her to leave?"

Catriona knew the answer was written on her face and, regardless, avoiding the answer wasn't an option. "We were. How did you know?"

"The night of the dinner party she was very attentive to you. Her glancing touches with you--they were so intimate. I was so frustrated by her actions." Katherine feigned preoccupation with the line she was idly drawing with her finger down Catriona's thigh. "Did you renew your acquaintance when she returned?"

Catriona was suddenly fearful of the words she was about to utter. "We did, but this time the relationship was somehow different--from the way we were when I was younger. And it was nothing like what I now have with you. Adele and I weren't so much rekindling a great passion as a revisiting an intense friendship." Her eyebrows creased. "It's hard to describe."

"Why did she leave again?"

She chuckled and pulled Katherine to her. "You weren't the only one people-watching at the dinner party. Adele spent the greater part of the night trying to figure out where you fitted in my life. Her suspicions were confirmed when she walked in on us in the dining room." Colour blossomed in Katherine's cheeks. Catriona closed the slight distance between them and reassuringly kissed Katherine. "When she asked me, I had to tell her the truth. Despite my protests, she said you felt the same way. But she said if she stayed, nothing would happen between us. So she left and I let her go."

Katherine's eyes deliberately avoided Catriona's. "Do you regret your decision? You took a significant gamble."

"I know. Yet, in truth, the risk was one I was willing to take. As for my decision, I don't regret it in the least. In all honesty, I know Adele and I could've been content with what we had. But she was no longer who I wanted and she knew that as well. I think she was right when she said I would gradually begin to resent her for that. For there's only one person I truly want and love, and it's you." Gathering Katherine into her arms, Catriona once again claimed Katherine's lips with her own.

Breaking the kiss, Catriona laughed. "Woman, have you any idea how beautiful you are? You're like wine I can't get enough of." She gently brought Katherine's hand to her face, smelling her own scent on Katherine's fingers. Taking a finger in her mouth, Catriona sensually toyed with it, then offered her fingers to Katherine. Without hesitation Katherine's lips closed over her fingers, evoking another groan of pleasure from Catriona.

Catriona straddled one of Katherine's thighs. "I need to feel more of you." She slowly undulated against Katherine's thigh with a rhythm matching her mounting need. Katherine's hands gripped her backside. She held her there, her motion synchronised with Catriona's.

Their slick pace increased. Catriona was overcome by the feelings coursing through her. Gazing into Katherine's eyes, she saw the reflection of her own passion and excitement steadily building in Katherine's face.

Katherine's mouth ravaged her neck. She alternated between kissing and lightly nipping it with her teeth. Katherine locked her arms around Catriona, heightening the sensations between them. Arching her neck, Catriona cried out Katherine's name. They came together with a depth of passion Catriona had never thought possible.

Spent, she lowered herself onto Katherine, amazed at the way her body moulded so well with her lover's. As the heat between them became too great, Catriona rolled off Katherine, and on to her back.

Katherine gently wiped beads of perspiration from Catriona's forehead. She felt strangely empty when Catriona eased herself off her. Rolling on to her side, she possessively draped her leg over Catriona and smiled. In the space of such a small time, things had changed so much. Gone was the apprehension and confusion of the past weeks. For once, Katherine felt at ease and relaxed.

Catriona smiled as she stroked her leg. "I feel like I'm looking at someone who, for the first time, is relaxed and happy. She looks like she's found a place where she belongs. Am I correct?"

"I'm happier than I've ever been, and you're the reason. For once I think I'm home. Having found that place, I'll never leave you, my love, no matter what happens." She again covered Catriona's body with her own and kissed her deeply, all sense of time and chores forgotten.

CATRIONA AWOKE TO the calling of her name and the sound of footfalls in the house. She shifted out of Katherine's embrace. Katherine eyes also opened and, wide-eyed, they looked at each other. "Susan!"

Katherine had barely begun to frame a sentence when Catriona bolted out of the bed, grabbed her robe, and was out the bedroom door.

Coming down the hallway, Susan barely avoided colliding with Catriona. "For Christ's sake, what are you still doing in bed? Are you ill? Never mind. Katherine didn't come home last night and my horse turned up less harness and one sister. With all the rain last night I fear she may have come to no good . . ." Her words trailed into silence. Catriona realised Susan was no longer looking at her, but over her shoulder. Following Susan's gaze Catriona turned her head, to find Katherine, wrapped in a blanket, her hand furiously trying to bring some order to her hair. "Morning, Susan," Katherine said sheepishly.

Dumbstruck, Susan looked at Catriona and then Katherine and back to Catriona. Stepping forward she hugged Catriona. "Oh, I'm so happy for you both." She slapped Catriona on the arm. "What am I saying--I've been worried sick! Here I was thinking the worst and instead nothing's happened at all. Well, something *has*, but nothing dire," she scolded in mock remonstrance.

KATHERINE SHUFFLED AROUND a bemused Catriona and gently manoeuvred the slightly stunned shopkeeper into the kitchen and onto a seat. "I got caught in the rain, and if it hadn't been for Catriona I most likely would have died. She found me wandering the road, somewhat the worse for wear." Katherine tightened the blanket around herself. "Now we've sorted that out, how about we have some lunch?" Casting a sideways glance at Catriona she commented, "I'm starving," and was quietly pleased at the blush suffusing Catriona's face.

"Yes. *No*," Susan said almost instantly. "You don't understand. Katherine, when you didn't come home, I had no other option than to speak to the town constable. When I left, he was getting together a search party. We're supposed to meet here. They should be here any minute."

A look of horror passed between Katherine and Catriona. Catriona held up her hand. "There's a way through this. I'll explain it just as it happened."

Katherine stared at her, mouth agape.

"*Less* a few pertinent details of course. Susan, can you keep an eye out for the constable and his group?" Susan nodded and walked out the kitchen door and onto the verandah.

"You." She pointed at Katherine. "Go back to bed until they've left."

Katherine wheeled and headed back from whence she came. As she reached for the doorknob, Catriona's hand touched her shoulder.

"What is it?"

"Katherine, you can't sleep in your room."

"Why not?" Katherine asked, impervious to what the problem was. "I always slept here when I stayed with you. I'll hop back in here and everything will be fine, you'll see." She reassuredly patted Catriona's arm, and made herself comfortable in the centre of the bed.

"Well, not exactly, my love. The bed--it doesn't exactly look like one person has been sedately lying in it, close to death, does it?" Catriona laughed at Katherine's look of shocked recognition. "Come on. I'll put you in my parent's room and you can use one of my mother's old nightgowns. I'm sure the doctor would have even *more* questions if he found you sleeping in the nude." Catriona led her down the hall.

CATRIONA HAD BARELY enough time to affect a fast change of clothes when there was a knock at the front door. Fortunately, by the time she'd got her boots on, Susan had managed to heat some water and prepare a hasty meal, and was busily feeding the men when Catriona came through the kitchen door. Retelling the story to the collective audience, Catriona reassured them

Sister Flynn was all right, but was now resting. In reassurance, the doctor who had travelled with the group performed a quick examination on Katherine. He returned to the kitchen, declaring her fine if not noticeably tired and hungry from her exertions.

Catriona barely managed to stop herself from choking on a biscuit. Looking up, she saw Susan wink at her before Susan picked up an arranged tray of food for Katherine.

It took quite a while, and another lot of lengthy reassurances for Catriona to get the group of relieved men from her home. Waving the last one off, she turned to a smiling Susan.

"Oh, Catriona, I can't tell you how happy I am for you. When she didn't come home last night, I feared the worst and, from what you've said, that was almost the case. She's a beautiful woman." Susan suggestively wiggled her eyebrow. "From the passing glimpse I got of her this morning." Susan laughed and prodded Catriona's arm. "Just make sure you take care of her."

Catriona wrapped Susan in a hug. "That's one thing you can be sure of."

Susan made her way down the steps and climbed into her own buggy and headed for home.

Walking through the now quiet house, Catriona opened the door to her parent's room, her breath catching at the figure of Katherine, reclining on the bed.

"Are they gone?" Katherine whispered.

Catriona placed a kiss on her forehead and sat down next to her. "Yes, and thank God for Susan's early arrival. Otherwise it might have been disastrous." Catriona got off the bed as quickly as she had gotten on it, and started toward the door. "Well, so much for that episode."

"Where are you going?"

Turning around, Catriona caught her breath.

Katherine had sat up, allowing the bedclothes to fall.

"What happened to the nightgown?" she lamely asked.

Katherine smiled. "After the doctor finished his visit, I didn't think there'd be any great need for it. Now, where are you going?"

Catriona fought to tear her eyes away from Katherine's breasts. "I, er, have work to do. The accounts haven't been the same since you left. They're the bane of my existence." Despite her best intentions, she was irrevocably drawn to Katherine, until she was again sitting on the coverlet beside her.

Katherine casually draped her arm on Catriona's moleskin-clad leg. "Why don't we make a deal? How about you leave those books to me and you look after your patient here?"

Catriona was temporarily taken aback by the brazenness of Katherine's words. As a smile gathered at the corners of her mouth, Catriona leant toward her. "Deal, Katherine, deal," she replied, claiming Katherine's waiting lips with her own.

Chapter Sixteen

"BUT, SISTER FLYNN, I don't understand," Mrs. Greystone said, her forehead creased.

Katherine calmly took another sip of her tea, while internally she rolled her eyes. It had been the same with Father Cleary. His confusion was accompanied with terse questions regarding her decision. Despite his probing, she had no intention of telling him, *or* Mrs. Greystone the real reason for her return to Gleneagle.

"I know this is sudden." Katherine leant forward, and deliberately aimed her cup and its contents toward the plate of cucumber sandwiches. "Oh, I am so sorry," she said as the spilt tea turned the already soggy sandwiches a light brown. "How careless of me." Katherine rose to help clean up her mess.

Mrs. Greystone clucked in disgust. "No, Sister, I'll get one of my servants to clean it." She rang an ornate gilded handbell on the table beside her and waited expectantly. No one came. "I swear it is hard to get good help these days. Please excuse me for a minute, won't you?"

As Mrs. Greystone hurried out of the room, Katherine's thoughts strayed to Catriona. Her life had changed in ways she would have never thought possible. On moving back to Gleneagle, they no longer slept in separate rooms. With each passing night, Katherine became more accustomed to falling asleep in Catriona's arms. At first, she'd struggled with the idea of going to bed naked. And, she couldn't believe Catriona's brazen way of strolling around the bedroom, and sometimes the house, unclothed. Katherine attempted to maintain some air of modesty with her nightgown.

Such modesty didn't last long, with her clothes being quickly shed by Catriona once they retired for the evening. Catriona had promised to share further knowledge of the delights of lovemaking. Katherine touched her face, feeling the heat there. For as much as Catriona shared the art of lovemaking with her, Katherine had been a very eager pupil.

Mrs. Greystone's return interrupted Katherine's reveries. "Take Sister Flynn's cup away and get her another one," Mrs. Greystone imperiously said. "And get me a new plate of sandwiches. Next time when I ring, I expect you to be at your station, not upstairs cleaning the rooms."

Mrs. Greystone took a seat, her thin-lipped smile plastered on her face. "Now Sister Flynn, why have you gone back to Miss Pelham's property?"

"While Mrs. Crosier has been a most gracious host, the recent incident with the bushrangers, coupled with the lack of space at her residence for my books, made it a most practical solution." She nodded her thanks as Mrs. Greystone's servant handed her another cup of tea. "In fact, that brings me to something I wished to discuss with you. The children in the district are extremely keen learners. They have nearly finished all the books I ordered for them. I think it would be a marvellous idea for both their education and the town if we were to establish a small library."

Mrs. Greystone reached forward and condescendingly patted Katherine's hand, "Your project is very commendable, my dear. However, don't you feel your time could be better spent attending to your religious duties? After all, are you offering these children false hope by giving them such education?"

Katherine fought to maintain an air of equanimity while, inside, she seethed. If Mrs. Greystone patted her hand one more time like that, she was going to cut it off. "How do you know whether the education is worthwhile if you never allow them the freedom to learn in the first place? In Ireland, under the class system, working class children rarely get the opportunity to learn. Consequently, they never break free of the bonds constraining them. I was led to believe one of the true benefits of Australia was its relative independence from such archaic thinking. Surely I wasn't misinformed?" Given Mrs. Greystone's embarrassed look, she realised she had spoken too freely, something she continually struggled with. She knew her religious duties were remiss. Nevertheless, this was at the expense of the children's education. Strangely enough, her choice didn't gravely upset her.

Mrs. Greystone opened her mouth to reply but there was a slight knock on the door to the parlour, and the servant entered. "Excuse me ma'am, Sister. There's a man at the back door who says he's here to see you, Mrs. Greystone, about the new plan for your garden."

Mrs. Greystone stood. "Tell him I'm on my way. I'm sorry, Sister, but I must see to the plantings for coming season."

Katherine stood. "Of course." She expected that the money she was about to outlay for the garden could be as capably channeled toward a library. "I must be going also. Maybe we can speak further on the library, next time I visit."

"Of course, my dear, of course," Mrs. Greystone absently said, her mind clearly on thoughts of her garden.

HER CONTRACTED VISIT gave Katherine the opportunity to stop by Susan's store before returning home. She relayed the events of the afternoon to Susan.

"You'll find yourself off Mrs. Greystone's Christmas list now. She rarely likes being put in her place by anyone, let alone a foreigner. Enough of such talk." Susan cast an eye around the store. "How are things between you and Catriona?"

At the mention of Catriona's name Katherine's smiled. "They're wonderful. She's the happiest I've seen since my arrival."

"I'm so pleased for you both. After all the heartache she's been through over the past few months it's about time something good happened to her. She's been so lonely for such a long time. It pained me at first, that when she did find someone to love it happened to be you--a nun. But now, I can see a change in her."

"So can I. She's a lot more relaxed. I also see a difference in myself."

Susan canted her head. "How so?"

"I mean, my personal circumstances are *obviously* not the same, but it's more. For once I feel like I belong and that I'm loved. Don't get me wrong. I think my parents cared for me in their own special way. But they were always so restrained. The sense of belonging Catriona provides gives me a strength I've never had in my life."

Susan laughed. "I hate to prove you wrong, but I've never seen you lack willpower."

Katherine shrugged. "Catriona said the same thing."

"I hope you don't mind me asking, but what happened to help you make up your mind about Catriona? I don't mean to pry, and I don't want to know what happened to make you initially move in with Me Lin and me. I hope you don't mind me saying this, but on the night of the dinner, you acted so strangely. Then your mood on the journey home was sombre to say the least. At that moment I thought *neither* of you would ever arrive at a logical solution to your feelings for each other."

"Have you got a moment to go out back? I don't think it would be a good idea for what I'm about to say to be overheard."

After retiring to the kitchen, she told Susan about leaving the Connor farm, the realisation of her feelings, and her subsequent seizure by the bushrangers, or what was left of them. She mentioned Mary's clandestine kitchen visit, and the confused feelings she'd experienced then, and how Mary's imminent death aided Katherine in fully understanding the depth of feelings she shared for Mary and, more importantly, Catriona.

"How did Catriona react to the news about Mary?" Susan queried. "I'm assuming you've spoken with her?"

Katherine nodded. "I told her about it the day we admitted our feelings for each other." Katherine blushed, suddenly shy. "She was concerned at first. Now that's in the past and all Catriona's living for is the present and future. There's something else you won't be aware of. Mary, the leader of the bushrangers, passed away from wounds she received in her last robbery. I don't expect there'll be any bushranging in this part of the countryside for a long time."

Susan nodded soberly. "Despite the threat she posed, I'm sorry for her passing. She helped a lot of poor people in the district. It's a shame we can't get the same amount of help from the more influential members of the town." Susan grasped her hand. "I think it's wonderful you and Catriona have finally resolved your feelings for each other."

Katherine's soft smile belied the lurch of her heart. For despite her dismissal of the religious innuendoes made by Mrs. Greystone, and her newfound relationship with Catriona, one element of the recent changes to her life still disturbed her----her status as a nun.

OVER THE ENSUING days, Katherine's thoughts continued to return to the issue of her religious status. Had she been in Ireland the solution would have been reasonably simple. She would have returned to the convent and given a reason for not staying in the Order. In truth, she'd never been made to feel like she was part of a group of women who dedicated their lives to God. In retrospect she'd always felt like she was no more to the convent than a means to an end, with it in turn allowing her to escape the clutches of her family and marriage.

When she arrived in Australia everything changed. She was no longer one of many, but a sole representative in a modest-sized country town. Unlike the cold religious distance she'd experienced at the convent, these down-to-earth people welcomed her with their hearts. They'd put their own and their family's faith in her, trusting her with the guidance she gave them and the education of their children.

As she sat in the study sorting through the pile of books in front of her, she at last hit upon a solution.

KATHERINE PLACED A light kiss on Catriona's cheek and sat beside her on the double-ended chaise lounge.

"What was that for?" Catriona pulled Katherine to her.

"Do I need a reason?" Katherine teased.

"You know you don't. Is everything alright?"

Katherine released a breath. "I'm so very happy for the love between us. At the same time, I can't help but feel I'm being unfaithful to the trust placed in me by the families around here."

Catriona rubbed Katherine's stomach. "I think you're being overly hard on yourself."

"Please, hear me out. How would they feel if they discovered I was living a life that was far removed from my religious calling? I've been thinking about that a lot. But the other day, I searched myself for what I currently do which gives me most satisfaction."

"I expect I was on the top of your list," Catriona joked.

Katherine mock slapped her hand. "Of course you were. Seriously though, I believe I only joined the Order as a means to an end. To get away from my mother's shame. Don't get me wrong. I'm firm in my religious beliefs, but no more so than any other person. What the Order *did* allow me to do was to work with children, and this is what I enjoy the most." Katherine smiled as she thought about the joy she brought through teaching them the rudimentary learning skills of reading and writing.

Catriona hugged her. "I can see that. Your moods are much lighter after you've been with the youngsters. It's as if a weight's lifted from you. In contrast, you're a lot different, not in a positive way, after a visit with Father Cleary or the ladies' committee."

"If what I truly enjoy is working with the children, then why can't I do that? Surely that doesn't have to stop because I no longer want to be a nun."

Catriona brushed her lips against Katherine's cheek. "While our love is no one's business but our own, I understand why you feel your actions are less than honest."

"Thank you."

"And, I'm glad you've made a decision. Lately you've been acting as if your mind's been somewhere else, and I expected it had something to do with this. Your idea to pursue your teaching of the children is an excellent one. I'm sure there are many who could go far if allowed the chance of a proper education. I don't mean to throw a wet blanket on your decision, but don't you think you should first tell the father about your wish to leave the Order?"

Katherine turned in Catriona's arms and nuzzled her chest. "I was hoping to lessen the blow by making him understand that while he may be losing another nun, I've no interest in leaving this town. In essence he gets the best of both worlds. I'm more than happy to continue with most of my duties. However, I honestly can't continue to perform them as part of a religious Order. It's not right for him and the families, and it's certainly not fair for us."

Katherine looked into Catriona's eyes. "You know I love you dearly. Please understand when I say that while I'm a sister I still feel as if I'm married to the church and God. I don't want to share myself with anyone but you. As long as I'm a nun I can't completely do that."

"I understand, but to me you're already mine. Isn't tomorrow the day you regularly visit Father Cleary?"

Katherine nodded.

"Are you going to speak with him about your decision?"

"Yes," Katherine replied, her voice muffled in Catriona's shirt.

"All right then. In the meantime, I feel desperate times require equally desperate measures. As far as I can see, the only thing signifying to me you're a nun is your infernal habit. And I can solve *that* problem. In turn you can fulfill a dream of mine." Catriona deeply laughed. Gently pushing Katherine from her, she slowly divested her of the black and white garment. Having done so, Catriona shed her own clothes and they passionately made love in front of the simmering fire.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, the two exchanged a long and lingering kiss. Catriona knew she couldn't be with her during her difficult task, but she hoped in some way she could transfer some of her strength to Katherine. With a tentative backward wave Katherine was on her way, leaving Catriona to spend her day tending to some of the overdue needs of her farm. Aside from those chores which had taken second place to their newfound relationship, Catriona was expecting two male visitors. The day she'd organised with Robert Johnston for his mother to assist in the dinner party, Catriona had casually mentioned he and the young Gilchrist might wish to pay her a visit and spend a couple of days on the property. A week had passed since Robert sent a reply through a puzzled Katherine. He and William would visit the property for a passing visit. Catriona was quietly pleased she could help these two young men. She was almost certain they too were in the early stages of gauging their feelings for each other.

KATHERINE PULLED UP in front of the accommodation hotel, and took great pains in tethering her horse. She placed a nosebag on him and then reticently made her way up the steps.

"Good morning Sister Flynn. It's good to see you again." Father Cleary ushered Katherine into the parlour. "Is everything alright, Sister? You seem as if your thoughts are somewhere else."

"I'm fine, Father." Katherine moved into the room, smoothed her habit and sat. Her calm outward countenance belied the apprehension stirring inside her. "How are you? I must say there's been a distinct change in the weather over the past week. Last month it was merely warm, but now it's a lot more unsettled."

Father Cleary creased his brow. "I believe you're right. While the nights stubbornly remain cool, we're definitely well into the summer months. I'm sure at first you'll enjoy the change from the cold Northern hemisphere climate at this time of year. But trust me, Sister, when our winter finally arrives, you'll be wishing and wondering if summer will ever raise its face again." He took a seat.

Katherine quietly smiled, disturbed that all she could think of was the prospect of snuggling up close to Catriona in front of a roaring fire. Her face flushed as she reminisced on the previous evening's activities. "You forget I'm used to the harsh winters of Ireland. It's not unusual to stay beside the warmth of the hearth for days on end. Australian winters aren't as harsh as that, are they?"

"Not in this part of the country at least. All the same, you'll need to wear your woollen habits."

Katherine couldn't help but think the father was wrong. She couldn't honestly ever see herself in those woollen habits again.

He paused at a knock on the door. "Thank you," he said as a pot of tea and biscuits were set down between them.

As he poured the tea, Katherine went over her progress in the district. She particularly emphasised the interaction she had in educating the district's children, again stating her concerns regarding the absence of any formal means of education within the town. She enthusiastically spoke about the reception her books had received, as well as her intent to circulate them around the families. In an attempt to put in a good word for Catriona, she mentioned Catriona's generous offer to pay for the next order of books on the proviso Katherine didn't turn her house into a library.

Father Cleary smiled. "Miss Pelham's offer is most generous. If I could only convince some of the other affluent families of the worth of these working farmers and their families, then maybe we could have our own library for everyone. Unfortunately, I think sometimes they are perhaps too frugal for their own good."

Katherine took a sip from her tea as she thought on how to broach the next topic. What she wouldn't give now for a wee dram to steady her nerves. "Father, there's one other matter I must discuss with you." She met his questioning glance. "I know this is presumptuous, but could you let me tell you what I have to say without interruption? I expect you'll have many questions, which I promise I'll endeavour to answer for you, when I'm finished."

He silently nodded and settled into his chair.

"I believe you need to know something about my calling as a nun. I'll admit to you religion has always had a place in my life. But my sole reason for my current calling was borne out of another situation. I experienced the unfortunate circumstance of being left at the altar by a prospective husband. For reasons not quite clear to me, my mother placed the blame for what happened at my feet. To escape her continual remonstrations, I left home and entered a convent. When they told me a nun was needed in Australia I jumped at the chance. I didn't know what to expect. In essence, it took me away from a place I felt I wasn't part of.

"I know my arrival in town was less than orthodox. At the same time, I feel this worked to my advantage. The friendship and interaction I've achieved with the townsfolk could only have arisen out of the tragic circumstances I was initially thrust into. In truth, I've found my greatest joy has been the time I've spent with the children, helping them with their education. Through that I feel the town itself has made me one of their own." She cautiously raised her eyes, trying to read the look on his face. "Father, it's *that* feeling I wish to formalise. I want to be a part of this town and live as the other women of this town do. With my feelings so reconciled, I honestly believe I can no longer be a nun."

Save for the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner, silence settled over the room. Katherine waited, hands nervously clasped, for an answer.

"Why this sudden need to part from your religious life? Isn't it sufficient that you're already part of the town?" His calm response was at odds with the rigidity of his body. "You're well accepted and respected by all." He searched her face. "Surely you can see this in the people you work with?"

Katherine lowered her head. "I don't think I can honestly look at people and tell them the loss of their child or the ruin of their crops is God's will. In circumstances such as those, I find myself questioning the holy logic of such actions. If I were to continue under my current vows, I'd be committing the sin of lying to these people. I'm afraid after a while I would grow cynical and I don't want that. I want to do what I enjoy most and that's to work with these people as an educator and a helper. But *not* as a nun."

Father Cleary pinched his brow and closed his eyes as if to block out Katherine's words. "I sense there's more to this than you're telling me, Sister. I'd be lying if I said your decision hasn't come as quite a shock to me. I feel I must ask you--what influence has Miss Pelham had in this decision of yours? She's an unorthodox woman with unconventional ways. Her actions with Mrs. Crosier on the day of her brother's death." He searched Katherine's face. "Surely *they* didn't escape your attention?"

Katherine's heart missed a beat. He couldn't possibly know the main reason for her leaving. "I have discussed this with Miss Pelham. She said she respected any decision I made. As for her actions on the day of her brother's death, I can only say what I saw was perfectly reasonable under the circumstances. Miss Pelham and Mrs. Crosier are close friends. It was only right that she should receive comfort from Mrs. Crosier when she refused any comfort we could offer."

Father Cleary rose and paced the room. "It's Sister Coreen all over again," he muttered more to himself than Katherine. "At least she waited until you arrived." He stopped and clapped his hands. He turned to Katherine, a self-satisfied smile on his face. "You must be aware I don't have any power over your presence here. I also have no power over the decision you've made. However, don't you think you should at least advise your Mother Superior of what you want to do and then give her time to provide you a response? There are protocols which must be addressed. They can't be done here. Will you at least wait for her reply?"

Katherine was taken aback. "You're right--I'd forgotten." She shuddered at the thought of having to return to Ireland for the formalities he'd mentioned to occur. In theory, her decision had been all too easy. In practice, she realised it wouldn't be a case of merely mailing her religious belongings with a letter of resignation.

"Yes, Father," she reluctantly replied. "I'll write to the Mother Superior and await her answer. You must be aware, though, I've made my decision. Regardless of what the Mother Superior has to say, I won't remain a nun in name's sake only. If I have to return to Ireland to leave the Order then I will. But, rest assured, I'll definitely return. My ties with this town are far too great to leave it forever."

CATRIONA SPENT HER morning tending to the accounting for the farm. She became so engrossed in her paperwork that until she heard the knock at the back door she'd forgotten the guests she was to have for the day.

Robert Johnston stood, hat in hand, at the kitchen entrance. Looking over his shoulder, she saw William Gilchrist, still sitting on the wagon. "Welcome to my home, Robert," she said, smiling. "And thank you for bringing out the blade for the stump plough. I swear with the ground out here, it's a wonder I don't go through more blades. Won't you come in? And tell William to come in also. I don't expect my reputation would be greatly enhanced if I left one guest outside while I entertained the other."

Robert motioned to William, who alighted from the wagon.

William tipped his hat. "Morning, Miss Pelham," he said and followed Robert inside.

"Why don't you both come on through to the parlour?" Catriona strode ahead of them and opened the door. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll get us some tea and scones."

Settling down with the two men in the parlour, she couldn't help but sense Robert's discomfort. She casually poured tea for the group and handed each man a cup. "Is anything the matter Robert?"

The young blacksmith uncomfortably shifted in his seat. "I'm sorry, Miss Pelham. It's just I've never been invited into a house like this. My family's home is so, er cramped, and this lovely home--it's so big."

Catriona sat back in her chair, one leg slung casually across her knee. "The size of a home isn't a measure of the inner wealth of a person. For what it's worth, you're always welcome here. That also goes for you, William. While we're at it, I'd prefer you call me Catriona. Calling me Miss Pelham makes me feel fifty years old, which I can assure you I'm not."

"Thank you for your offer, Miss, er, Catriona." Robert stumbled, finding it difficult to break with formality. He turned to William. "I'm sure I speak for both William and myself when I say we'd be happy to visit again, possibly on a day when there isn't work to do--a social visit perhaps?"

Catriona smiled, feeling a common bond with the young men. It was unnecessary to put in to words what was in front of her. She was sure, by the silent looks shared between them they were indeed lovers. She leant forward to retrieve a scone. "That would be very nice, very nice indeed."

The rest of the conversation revolved around work which was overdue in the Pelham family graveyard. William kept his responses to her questions concise and business-like. Far too serious for such a young man, Catriona thought. Although, given the reputation his father had around the district, she sympathised with him, struggling to carve a niche of individuality, representational of his own distinctive work.

She rose from her chair and Robert and William also stood. "I better let you get to your work then. I've got paperwork to see to in the study."

"So have we, I mean, work that is," Robert stammered.

"No problem. Just let yourselves out the back door."

Once they left the room, Catriona set about tidying up the parlour prior to Katherine's return. Although Katherine wasn't fastidious, she had a nervous habit of cleaning even the most miniscule mess left about in the house. Smiling to herself, she placed the plates, cups, and saucers on a tray and took them out to the kitchen.

From behind the gauze curtains of the kitchen window, she clandestinely watched the two men lift the additional plough blade from the rear of the wagon and carry it into the barn. As they walked back into daylight, William looked around and then reached up and gently wiped sweat from Robert's forehead. With a smile on his face, Robert also carefully looked around, then pulled a laughing William back into the darkness of the shed.

Catriona wondered if she acted the same way around Katherine. "I expect I'm well and truly relegated to the study--at least until Robert and William depart from my shed and head out for the family cemetery."

AFTER HER VISIT with Father Cleary, Katherine quickly left the main part of town, for fear of encountering one of the members of the ladies' committee. It had been a stressful morning, and the last thing she wanted to do was to have to endure inane pleasantries and false smiles. After the father's success with the ladies, firstly in allowing her to remain where she was and, secondly, supporting her decision to return to Gleneagle, relations between her and the committee had been somewhat strained. Not that this bothered her in the least. She didn't care for the opinions of women whose values were so shallow.

Having not visited Mary Connor since the birth of her last baby, she rode out to the Connor property. On arrival, she was greeted warmly by mother and children alike. Katherine was amazed to find, despite the difficulty of the birth, Mary was again knee deep in manual labour with a smiling Katie on her hip. She'd initially bestowed the majority of her books on the Connor children and had been amazed at the speed with which they'd learnt. Her heart ached at the idea of such keen seekers of knowledge resigned to working on a farm. She felt at least two of the children showed sufficient potential to pursue a more formal path of education. Unfortunately, such institutions were places for the wealthy, not struggling farmers who needed every hand there was to help them survive.

Satisfied their learning was progressing well, and, after delicately lecturing Mr. Connor on the strain continual births were having on a woman aged beyond her years, Katherine set her wagon for home.

As she headed toward the front gate of Gleneagle, she was surprised to see the happy faces of Robert Johnston and William Gilchrist as they left the property in their wagon. They sat close beside each other, as if sharing a joke, and not yet aware of her presence. William, on finally recognising Katherine, slid from where he was sitting as far away from Robert as possible. Robert looked up and blushed. Katherine pulled the wagon to a halt.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. You look like you've had quite a pleasant morning's work. I trust Miss Pelham hasn't worked you too hard?"

The faces of both men reddened, which she found strange.

"Oh no, Sister," Robert replied. "Not at all. We were happy to help Catr, er, Miss Pelham. She's also invited us back to finish our work."

"That's nice. Perhaps we can have lunch together next time you return?"

Robert smiled. "Thank you, Sister. That would be delightful. I'm sorry, but we must be on our way. There's still plenty of work to be done at the foundry today. We hope to see you soon." He motioned his horse forward.

Perplexed, Katherine tilted her head and frowned. She was sure she'd missed something, but she didn't know what. Turning the wagon onto the property, she headed for the house to fill Catriona in on her visit with Father Cleary.

She smiled as she looked and saw Catriona, waiting on the verandah. What a change to come home to someone who was so much more than her friend, who'd hold her and love her no matter how difficult times become. She uttered a quiet blessing that Catriona had been at the station the day of her arrival, and not Mrs. Greystone.

After un-harnessing the horse Katherine walked to the verandah to find a woman very eager to learn the result of her day's discussions. Moving inside out of the afternoon sun, Catriona listened quietly while Katherine conveyed the essence of the morning's meeting.

Her face fell when Katherine mentioned she might have to return to Ireland to formalise her departure from the convent.

"Can't someone do it out here? Or can't they send a letter saying they respect your decision?" she complained, her frustration evident. "It's a long way to go to have someone advise you you're officially released from your vows."

"Catriona, I'm not quite sure how this is done. It only makes sense the Mother Superior may wish to speak to me prior to making her decision. As for somebody else doing it in her stead, I suppose I'll know this once I get a response to my letter. Rest assured, if I have to return to Ireland to see an end to this, then I will. And the minute the matter's resolved I'll return to you on the next available ship," she promised, stroking Catriona's face.

"Return to me, be damned. If you think I'm going to let you travel all that way without me, then you've got another thing coming. If you have to go halfway around the world, then so will I," Catriona declared as she held Katherine's hand.

Katherine was surprised by the vehemence of Catriona's reaction. "If you do go, who'll look after the property? The visit could take over a year."

Catriona smiled a secret smile. "Oh, I think I've just the people in mind for the job. I'm sure Robert and William would be *more* than willing to look after the property." Before Katherine could question her further, Catriona got out of her seat and, taking Katherine in her arms, gave her a lingering kiss.

THAT EVENING, AS they lay in bed, Katherine remembered the reaction she'd evoked in the two men that afternoon and described the incident to Catriona.

Catriona's body shook with silent laughter.

Katherine raised herself on her elbow and looked indignantly at Catriona. "And what is it you find so funny?"

Catriona, having finally managed to regain her control, looked knowingly into Katherine's eyes, in turn evoking warmth deep inside Katherine. "You mean you honestly don't know?" She reached for Katherine's lithe form.

Katherine luxuriated in the feel of her skin against Catriona's. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Unless I'm completely off the mark which, as you know, I very rarely am." Catriona dodged Katherine's mock punch, "I believe young Robert and William are lovers," she smugly declared.

Katherine's jaw dropped and she felt her face redden. She tapped her chin as she thought on the matter. "Now that you mention it, it's so obvious. I mean the closeness, laughter, and looks they shared when I approached them. Then William's quick shuffle away from Robert. I'm surprised I didn't notice."

Katherine looked at Catriona and giggled. "Oh my, the shock they must have got, seeing the pious Sister Flynn approach." She entwined her legs around Catriona's. "I wonder what their reaction would be if they could see the brazen and wanton side of my life."

"At least for the moment, I think the less said the better," Catriona huskily replied, as she brought her lips down to meet a laughing Katherine's.

Chapter Seventeen

FOR CATRIONA THE next week was unusually long, with Katherine's temper resembling a bear with a sore head. Catriona's repeated offers to help Katherine write her letter to the Mother Superior were continually met with terse refusal. Exasperated, she turned her efforts to planting the lucerne and barley crops for the oncoming season. She was again grateful for the group of workers who helped make a potentially difficult task easy. She made a mental note to ensure she was extra generous with the Christmas hampers that year.

When she was not outside, Catriona retreated to the solitude of the study and away from a frustrated Katherine. Then one morning, while she read a week-old copy of the Sydney newspaper, there was a soft knock on the study door. She looked up as Katherine walked toward her.

Katherine held out her hand. "Could you have a look at this for me?" she asked sheepishly.

Catriona took the letter and silently read the missive, then solemnly met Katherine's eyes. "It doesn't say anything about you and me in here."

Katherine snatched the letter back from her, her tongue clicking in disgust. "If you're not going to take this seriously, then I'm not going to waste my time." She marched to the door.

Catriona jumped out of her chair and placed her hand on the handle to halt Katherine's dramatic departure. "Oh, for heaven's sake I was only joking! I didn't expect you'd tell the Mother Superior about us. And, as you so correctly indicate in your letter, there are a number of reasons for your decision."

Katherine's body slightly relaxed. "I know you were only teasing. But, given what this letter means, it's been hard while I've been writing it to find *any* humour in the matter."

"I know." Catriona pulled Katherine into her arms. "You're finished now and that's the main thing. And a good thing as well--I was running out of paper." Catriona smirked. "The letter's fine. When are you going to send it?"

"I'd like to mail it as quickly as possible. The sooner I do this, the faster I'll get a reply. Then we can honestly get on with living our own life. Are you going into town tomorrow?" Catriona nodded. "I'll come in with you and give it to the postmaster. Now how about we get some of the work done that's been waiting and tolerating my boorish mood for the past week?"

They spent the remainder of the afternoon riding the property, checking on the status of the newly planted lucerne and barley shoots.

"I'm glad we had rain the other day." Catriona cast her eyes over the paddock in front of her. Just last week this was only a sewn field. Now it's a tinge of green."

"It does make it look so lush," Katherine said.

"Unfortunately, though, it won't be long and the kangaroos will seek out these sweet grasses. I'll have to ride out here early in the morning to see to them."

"Are you bringing them feed?"

Catriona bit the inside of her cheek. "Not exactly. I need to shoot them."

Katherine turned in her side-saddle, her shock evident. "I can't believe you're planning to kill those creatures! In terms of size, there isn't that much to them. Surely they don't eat much?"

"One kangaroo doesn't eat much, but they don't travel alone. They travel in mobs capable of ruining a farmer's livelihood in less than a week. Rest assured, I only cull as much as I need to. I don't do it for sport, like some of the richer families do."

"If you have to do it, then so be it. Although don't expect me to help you. I honestly can't see myself killing such beautiful animals."

KATHERINE TIGHTLY GRIPPED her letter as the wagon rolled along the rutted road. "I don't mean to be rude, but why do you call Mr. Tanner the postmaster? Isn't he the stagecoach driver?"

"He *is* the stage coach driver, but he's also a part of the newly formed general post service. In fact, I've heard that both Melbourne and Sydney have their own General Post Offices. The one in Sydney is where your letter will go for sorting prior to it heading to Ireland."

Katherine frowned. "Why not send it via the train?"

"You could, but the next train's not due for another week. And, as strange as it may seem, the coach will still beat the train." Catriona swatted a fly from her face. "The coach route is less circuitous."

Katherine raised her brows. "I never realised. But then I've never had reason to post many letters to Ireland." She fingered the thin envelope. "How much will it cost to send this?"

Catriona shrugged. "More than a shilling--less than two."

"Are you serious?" She thought back to the lesson two weeks ago, where she'd used weekly salaries to help teach the children math. "That's almost half a day's wages."

"That may be so, but I don't see we have a choice. It has to be sent, and when you think how far it has to go, that probably accounts for the letter's price." Catriona patted Katherine's hand. "Trust me, my love, I'd pay a lot more to see you get an answer from the convent."

Katherine clasped Catriona's hand with her own. "Thank you."

With Catriona driving the wagon, Katherine scanned the countryside. She was surprised by the changes since her arrival. With the onset of regular rain, the yellow brown grass was now interspersed with a carpet of green on which cattle contentedly grazed. One thing which struck her as truly beautiful were the blossoms on the enormous eucalyptus trees. In all the time she'd been here she'd thought on these trees as steadfast, reliable, and decidedly masculine in their visage. Now they revealed their true beauty. She smiled. They reminded her of Catriona. Strong, silent, and unapproachable at first--but, in essence, hiding their true tenderness. She again whispered a silent prayer of thanks.

Catriona turned and smiled. Returning her smile, Katherine asked, "A penny for your thoughts?"

"I was thinking, among other things, about how many times we've made this trip together, you sitting on *your* side and me on *mine*."

Katherine scooted closer to Catriona and took her hand. "I prefer the closeness to the distance option."

"I was also thinking about your letter. What happens if the Mother Superior refuses to release you from your vows? What will you do?"

Katherine sat back and frowned. "I hadn't given that much thought. Why wouldn't they honour my request, especially if I no longer want to be part of their Order?"

"I don't mean to play Devil's advocate, but have you thought it mightn't suit them? I expect they've outlaid a great deal of money to send you here and they'll be looking for a return on their investment. Besides, the idea of them having to send out another nun so soon to replace you may not be financially viable. Plus, in one of your more *delightful* moments, you once told me nuns are married to the church. Aren't you breaking your vows in seeking what you wish?" Catriona winced at the look of worry which clouded Katherine's features.

"I think we should wait to see what her response is before seeing only the bad in things. If they refuse my request though, I'll have to take another approach. I'll pack up everything I have which belongs to the convent and return it to Ireland," Katherine declared vehemently. "I've no intention of living as a nun for the rest of my life and I also have no intention of living the rest of my life without you!"

Catriona drew the wagon to a halt, short of a bend in the road. She secured the reins, applied the brake, and turned to Katherine. "You don't know what it means to me to hear you say that. I've never had anyone who was so willing to take risks for me like you are, not even Adele. I honestly hope everything goes smoothly. Whatever the result I'll be here for you. I only hope I

can live up to what you want and need from me." Closing the distance between them, Catriona surreptitiously glanced around, then took Katherine's face in her hands and tenderly kissed her.

Both were so engrossed in each other they didn't hear the phaeton buggy until it was close enough for its occupants to view them. At the clatter of the buggy wheels, Catriona abruptly pulled away from Katherine. She turned to see the buggy drawing closer and caught sight of the shocked faces of Miss Elsbeth Greystone and a male companion who stared wordlessly at them. Before Catriona could utter a word, the man urged the horse into a canter, and the horse and buggy swept by.

Given their reaction, Catriona was in no doubt they'd witnessed them kissing, and she cursed under her breath for kissing Katherine, in full view of anyone who rode along.

Katherine groaned as the phaeton made a hasty departure. Of all the people in the region, why did it have to be the daughter of the head of the ladies' committee? She was sure the young woman would waste no time in telling her mother what she'd seen. Fortunately, this was the only road she could return on, and she and her male friend had been travelling *away* from town.

Catriona looked at Katherine. "Well, I suppose that's torn it. It won't be long before the ladies' committee will finally have their suspicions confirmed." She laughed bitterly. "It's a shame really. I've been leading them on such a merry chase for so long. I'm sure Mrs. Greystone will waste no time in advising Father Cleary of our horrendous actions."

Katherine's face ran the gamut of emotions from shock to anger. Her hands balled into tight fists and she fought her barely controlled rage. "I'll be damned if I'm going to allow our happiness to be disturbed by that intrusive woman. I haven't come half the way around the world to find love and then be cheated out of it when it's barely begun. We'll mail the letter and wait for a reply. In the meantime, if the town's about to know all, then I might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb." Katherine reached over, drew Catriona into embrace, and passionately kissed her.

Catriona pulled back from kiss. "You never cease to amaze me. I can see there's not going to be a dull moment between us, my love. I suggest we get into town and mail your letter. Because if you do that to me again, I'm just as likely to disrobe you by the side of the road. Now *that* would give them something to talk about. We better let Susan know what's happened and then head home. We may have a long wait until the dust settles over the both of us, if it ever does." She motioned the horse back on to the centre of the road and toward town.

KATHERINE USED THE last of her savings to send what she hoped would be her lifeline out of the convent. The postmaster assured her it would reach Sydney within four days, where it would thereafter be put on a vessel bound for Ireland. Because all mail was sent by steam packet, the earliest she could expect a response was four months. Katherine gasped at the time period, only now realising how long the wait would be.

The two walked up the mercantile stairs. "While you load the wagon, I'm going to speak with Me Lin. Morning Susan," Katherine said when they entered the store. "Is Me Lin here?"

"Yes, she's in the laundry. Is everything alright?"

Katherine tilted her head toward her companion. "Catriona will fill you in."

Catriona quickly relayed the morning's events to Susan. "So, I think it would be a good idea if we get enough stores to see us through the next month."

"Sure, but before you start loading the wagon, what do you think the town will do when this gets out?"

"I've a pretty good idea of the reaction of the ladies' committee. There'll be malicious private celebrations and 'I told you so's' all round," Catriona said. "As for the rest of the town, I can't be certain. I don't think they'll be too receptive to the idea of me ravishing their nun. Whether they'll continue to think along those lines, or try to force us out of town--" Catriona shrugged. "I don't know. I'll tell you one thing though. I'm willing to sit this out for as long as it takes. I don't intend to leave here merely to satisfy the prejudices of others. I only hope, after a while, they either get used to us or just leave us alone."

"Only time will tell." Susan came around the counter. "Why don't I give you a hand to load the wagon?"

By the time they were finished, the buckboard was packed to the brim with all manner of goods. Catriona wiped her hands on the back of her trousers and reentered the store. "I'm not sure if that'll be enough supplies for us to wait out what's to come. But it should go some of the way." Catriona settled her bill of sale at the counter.

Susan nodded her thanks as she took the note from Catriona. "Other than what I've just done, I don't know there's much more I can do for you except to point out to those who'll listen that who you love doesn't change the person you are. You have the respect of a lot of people in this community. People who will lose out if you're forced to leave. I've no doubt they'll initially be angry over the matter. I'll keep my ear to the ground and let you know which side of the fence the town is sitting on. Unfortunately though, I don't think their acceptance is going to occur overnight."

Katherine returned from her discussions with Me Lin. Susan reassuringly squeezed her arm. "You'll be fine as long as you stick together." Susan swept around the counter and gave Catriona a hug. "And so will you. Now you best be on your way."

ALTHOUGH THEY RETURNED via the road where they'd been caught in their embrace, they didn't see the returning phaeton or Miss Greystone and her companion. Unless it had been an

abridged trip and Miss Greystone returned past the store unnoticed, then Catriona surmised that the town was still ignorant of what had happened.

On returning to the farm, they unloaded the provisions and packed them away in their respective places. Having finished, they sat beside each other at the kitchen table and shared a pot of tea. Both were lost in their own thoughts, considering the storm which was about to descend on them.

THE NEXT DAY Catriona had little reason to work around the house, but she couldn't help but feel it would be in Katherine's best interests that she didn't stray far from it. She worked on superfluous paperwork in the study until she heard the sound of a carriage coming up the drive. She looked out the window and grimly smiled. It mustn't have taken the Greystone girl long to tell her story. Catriona walked to the front door and opened it.

Father Cleary stood at the foot of the front steps, his countenance stony. At Catriona's presence in the doorway he took a step back and busied himself with tethering his horse, then turned Catriona's way.

"I've come to speak with Sister Flynn." He barely made eye contact with her. "Is she in?"

Despite an almost overwhelming desire to physically remove him from her property, Catriona maintained a level head. "Yes, she is. If you'd like to move into the parlour I believe you'll find her there." Turning, she walked headlong into Katherine.

KATHERINE STOOD SILENTLY, her focus on Father Cleary. "I heard the front door open and wondered who was visiting us at this time of day. Won't you come in, father?"

Katherine walked down the hall to the parlour without bothering to see if he was following. Waiting, she stepped aside and allowed him to enter. When Catriona made to follow, Katherine stopped her. "No, I've no doubt there are things Father Cleary wishes to discuss with me in private." She gave her a reassuring look and gently pushed Catriona back through the entrance and closed the door behind her. Turning, she realised he hadn't taken a seat. As calmly as possible she sat, anticipating his onslaught.

"When Mrs. Greystone came to me yesterday afternoon with her wild tale, I was ready to dismiss it as yet another example of her overactive imagination.

In fact, on the ride out here all I could think of was the perfectly reasonable explanation you'd have for what occurred yesterday." Father Cleary paced the room, failing to rein in his anger. "Yet when I arrived and saw the two of you together--I chastise myself for not seeing it sooner."

Katherine remained silent.

"Young Miss Greystone saw you and Miss Pelham exchange a--a kiss, like one exchanged between man and woman. Is--is this true? Are you two intimate in such a manner?"

Katherine's nod was the spark which ignited his flame of rage.

He fixed his hawkish glare on Katherine. "And you have the audacity to call yourself a nun! Is it not sufficient you should break your vows of celibacy, but you do so with a woman? What the two of you are doing is sacrilege not only in the eyes of the church but this town as well. Not one week ago you sat in front of me and said your leaving the church wasn't that woman's doing. You even said you couldn't bear to sin by living a lie any longer. So what kind of lie are you now living, Sister?"

Katherine had heard enough and crossed the floor to meet Father Cleary face to face, barely managing to keep her own anger in check. "I remember what you asked me, and everything I told you was true. My leaving the church has never been Catriona's doing. Despite what you may think with or *without* her, I would have eventually left.

"As for me living a lie, it's true. How can I serve out religious humble pie when I find myself gagging on its taste? My lie had nothing to do with the relationship between the two of us. The relationship I have with the church and the townsfolk is what I found deceitful." She paused, her breathing strained. "And, as for what we have being sacrilegious, let me ask you this, Father. How is it something which involves love and commitment on both sides can be seen as sordid by such an all loving, omnipotent God?"

"I'm not about to get into a theological debate with you. You know or *should* know your scriptures better than most people. Such acts are regarded as unnatural. Stop for a moment and think about what you're doing. If you believe for one moment the town's going to accept what's going on out here, then you're sadly mistaken. As we speak, Mrs. Greystone is petitioning for your removal from the town. As far as I'm concerned, it's the only way there can be an end to this.

"Furthermore, I feel I can no longer trust you with the well-being of the children of the district. You're released from your requirement to work with them. I'd advise you not to approach them or I'll *personally* see to your removal!"

Katherine turned in an attempt to hide the pain on her face. She didn't care about his opinion of their relationship, but his warning regarding the children hurt her deeply. Teaching them was one of the things which had truly given her pleasure. Now he'd snatched it from her.

Collecting herself, she turned to face him. "You once told me you've no direct authority over my being here. If you've no direct authority then you can't order me to leave. As for the children, I can't believe you think I'd ever do anything to harm them. What *you're* demanding will hurt them. What will happen to their education without someone to teach them? It will wither and die. You've allowed me to build up their hopes, and now you're going to ruin it? If that's what you want, then so be it. But mark my words, I won't turn away any mother or child who approaches me."

"I can't have you thrown out of this town, but I doubt I'll have to. This is one time I'll be happy to have the ladies' committee do my work for me." Without waiting for Katherine's reply, he yanked open the door and strode out of the parlour.

CATRIONA CAME OUT of the kitchen in time to see the front door slam and Katherine slump against the hallway table. "He wasn't here long. I gather bad news travels fast."

"It does. He accused you of influencing my decision to leave the church and called our relationship sacrilege. He said I was a liar and that Mrs. Greystone is agitating to have me thrown out of town. If that isn't enough, he's taken from me all my responsibilities, *including* the education of the children. Catriona, he's set me adrift and taken one of the things I love doing most." Katherine moved into Catriona's comforting arms.

Catriona held onto her tightly. "At least you have me. Think about it, he could have brought the Greystone lynch mob with him."

"I'm glad I still have you." Katherine laughed bitterly. "But what kind of life can we expect to share with that woman ranting and raving all over town? I know her type. She's like my mother. She won't give up until she gets her own way. How are we going to cope?"

Pulling her tighter, Catriona was ashamed she didn't have an answer to give. "I don't know, my love. I don't know."

THAT NIGHT, DESPITE the comfort of Catriona's arms, Katherine couldn't sleep. Questions filled her head. Did she really want this sort of isolation? She'd never be able to go into town again, for fear of one of the members of the ladies' committee lurking around the corner, waiting to shout undeserving invectives at her.

Katherine rolled away, her gaze focused on the wall. More importantly, she wondered about Catriona, who had made it clear she wasn't worried about the town's feelings. But what about her business, and the people she had to work with in town? How would the farmer's cooperative react to the news? Would they still sell grain to her, or buy her crops?

The myriad of questions which clouded Katherine's mind were insurmountable. What was worse was the lack of any answers she could come up with. Sometime in the wee hours of the morning, beside a sleeping Catriona, she made her decision.

KATHERINE ROSE EARLY, avoiding their normal morning ritual of making love. She meandered mechanically about the kitchen, studiously avoiding contact with Catriona where

possible. She prepared breakfast, eating hers in silence and refusing to be drawn into a conversation.

By mid-morning the quiet had become unbearable. Catriona took a protesting Katherine into the parlour. "What's the matter?" Catriona searched her face. "You've hardly said two words to me this morning."

Katherine moved away. "It can't be like this," she said quietly. "My work here has suffered. Your work is bound to suffer because of the pressure the ladies' committee will bring to bear on the town. They'll ostracise us both. We'll never be able to show our faces, or go out anywhere. We'll be like prisoners to the prejudices of others. I don't think I can live like that."

The colour drained from Catriona's face. "What do you mean it can't work? It *is* working, Katherine. Why does it have to matter what the town says? We still have each other, no matter what."

"Is it enough? Maybe it is for today, next week or next month. What happens if it isn't? What are you going to do if you can't get help during the harvest? We couldn't possibly do the job ourselves. And what about mustering your cattle for sale, or selling your crops? Can you subsist if no one buys your produce? How will you live then? I couldn't bear to see you suffer because of me. And I'd hate to see you bitter and resentful because of it. There has to be more. But I don't want to see us end up hating each other for it."

"What are you saying?"

Katherine took a deep breath. "I think it would be best for both of us if I leave."

Catriona groaned, as if wounded. "How can you say that if you really love me? You said you'd never leave me. Now things are getting hard and you're going to walk out? Yesterday you were adamant we'd weather this. We *can* make it through this, Katherine," she pleaded. "I know we can. Just try harder."

It pained her to see Catriona so badly hurt. As she started toward her, Catriona recoiled like a child who'd been given a beating and wasn't sure why. Katherine stopped. "I love you and I'll always love you. If I didn't, I wouldn't be doing this. Can't you see that? I can't bear to see us grow apart from each other. Yes, I said I'd never leave you--I never will. I'll always be here with you in some form or other. Please trust me when I tell you there can be no other way to end this without further pain for us both." She raised her hand to her mouth as Catriona sobbed. Moving to her, Katherine took her in her arms and gently held her as she wept.

LATER IN THE morning, after what seemed a lifetime of trying to explain to a pleading Catriona that what she was doing was for the best, Katherine finally put an emotionally exhausted Catriona to bed.

Katherine hitched the wagon for a foray into town which, she knew, wasn't going to be an easy trip. Aside from the cold reception she was sure she'd receive, her emotions were strained to breaking point. She was forced to stop twice and shed her own tears before continuing on.

She entered the town, conscious of the eyes painstakingly avoiding her. Katherine concentrated on the task before her, to let Susan know what had happened so at least she and Me Lin could look out for Catriona.

After successfully negotiating the buckboard to a stop in front of the store, she struggled to get down. The more she tried to pry her habit loose from a place where it was wedged, the more flustered she got. She knew people were aware of her plight. No one offered to help though, almost as if to touch her would herald the same contagion she obviously carried.

She was fighting back tears of rage when someone reached in and loosened the cloth from its sticking place. She turned and looked into the quiet eyes of William Gilchrist, his hand outstretched while he waited to help her from the wagon.

No words were exchanged, even though she felt the surrounding crowds were eagerly waiting for some. Instead, a look of gratitude and acknowledgment passed between her and William before Katherine walked up the stairs and into the store.

Susan quickly finished with her customer and closed the door. "I saw what just happened through my window. Thank heavens for William's graciousness. What are you doing here? I thought we agreed you'd wait before coming back into town."

Katherine told Susan of the father's visit and the words between her and Catriona.

"It pains me to say it, but I can't help but think you're right." Susan brought her hand down hard on the counter top. "Damn the bloody narrowmindedness of some of these people!" She rubbed her hand across the back of her neck. "I'd like to think that the time will come when women like us can live together, without the judgment of others. Although that's unlikely while the likes of Greystone and Monteith prevail."

Katherine earnestly looked at Susan. "I'd ask one thing of you if I may."

"Of course. Anything."

"Take care of Catriona, especially in the first few days. She doesn't understand I do this because I love her. I don't want to see her hurt by these people. I'm not sure she'll cope, given what's happened between us and everything else that's happened to her."

Susan squeezed Katherine's arm. "Of course I will. Are you *sure* there's nothing else you can do? Your leaving is going to fundamentally affect her."

Katherine turned away, attempting to hide the tears in her eyes. "Don't you think I know that? I hope what I'm about to do works out for the better. I expect all I can ask of you is for you to trust my judgment on this and, most of all, take care of her."

"That's a promise. When are you going to leave?" Susan asked.

"I hope to secure a berth on the train which passes through here in two days. I know it doesn't leave me much time, but I think it's for the best. I can't bear to see Catriona suffer any longer than necessary." Katherine stopped at Susan's look of shock.

"I'm sorry, but it's all so sudden. I'll be at the train on Friday to see you go. But don't expect too many others." Susan came around the counter and opened the door to allow Katherine to pass through.

Katherine turned to her as if she'd forgotten something. "I want you to know I'm grateful for the friendship you and Me Lin have given me. I'll never forget it. I wish you both the best and hope you never find yourselves in a similar situation."

Katherine finished and was down the stairs before Susan could reply.

She had one final matter of business in town. Having spent the last of her funds on a letter to the convent, she was in the ironic situation of needing to ask for money so she could leave. Father Cleary gave her barely enough to cover her boat and train fare, advising her that the funds were not his and had been raised by the ladies' committee with this aim in mind. He told her if she needed lodgings in Sydney, she'd have to approach a convent and ask for their charity.

There were no more words left to be said between them, and Katherine left to book her passage at the train station.

DESPITE SHARING THE same bed, hardly anything was said between Katherine and Catriona during her remaining hours in the house. Catriona drifted from room to room, barely acknowledging Katherine's presence.

On their last night together, Catriona made love to Katherine, bringing her to climax again and again as if doing so would change her mind. Katherine responded by giving Catriona all she could, hoping to convey with her actions the abiding passion she felt for the only true love she had ever known.

By morning, Catriona was again sullen and distant. Katherine had packed her meagre possessions the previous night and was surprised to see the wagon hadn't been prepared for the journey.

Catriona sat on the verandah and looked vacantly at the distance. "I may have to live with you leaving. But if you think for one moment I'm going to help you, then you're wrong. You can leave the horse and cart at the train station. I'll pick it up in good time."

Katherine felt her legs almost buckle. "I thought..." She gripped the doorpost for support, at the realisation Catriona wouldn't be coming to the station. She steadied herself, then resolutely walked to the stables and harnessed the horse and wagon.

Despite her emotional state, her task took little time to complete. She returned to where Catriona sat and knelt in front of her statue-like form. "I know this is hard to accept. But what I'm doing I do for both of us. If you forget everything else then please remember this. I'll *always* love you no matter what. And I'll always be with you, if not in body, then in spirit." Katherine took Catriona's unresponsive body in her arms and kissed her one last time. Moving quickly lest she change her mind, she mounted the wagon and without a backward glance drove into town.

APPROACHING THE STATION, Katherine was relieved to see Susan waiting for her. Catriona refusing to see her off was bad enough. But to leave the town alone would've been too much to bear. She applied the wagon's brake. "Thank you for coming. As you can see I'm unaccompanied. I left Catriona sitting on the back verandah."

Susan helped Katherine with her two bags. "I didn't think she'd come in. It's probably for the best, given the possibility some of the ladies' committee may show up. I doubt she could have coped with them seeing her cry. Oh, I almost forgot. Me Lin asked me to give you this." Susan handed a parcel to Katherine. "She said you might need it."

"Thank you." Katherine placed the package in one of her near-empty suitcases. She looked up at Susan's watery eyes and smiled sadly. "You know this is for the best." She reached out and grasped Susan's hand. "Trust me when I tell you only good can come from this."

Susan choked back a sob. She reached into the folds of her skirt and pulled out a kid leather purse. "And this is from me to you." She placed the purse in Katherine's hand and closed her fingers around it. "I know you can't have much money left, and I'm sure you're going to need some."

Katherine wordlessly nodded and the two of them walked through the doors of the railway station. Katherine stopped short when she came on to the platform. Standing there, in what must have been their best set of clothes, was the Connor family. Katherine felt her eyes water over all the people she was leaving behind.

Mrs. Connor comforted her. "Now there's no need for tears. What kind of friends would we be if we didn't come and say goodbye? There have been a lot of things said about you and Miss Pelham over the last few days, and they don't need to be said again. I'm grateful to you, Sister, for the help you've given me and my family. It's important you know this. Not everyone feels like those hoity-toity women do. I also want you to know my Joseph will keep an eye out for

Miss Pelham, so she doesn't come to any harm." She brought a handkerchief up to her own nose and blew it loudly. "Some people may be quick to forget the good she's done, but not the Connors."

Katherine quietly thanked her then took her time to say goodbye to all the children before the train arrived. Aiden silently held out a bag containing pasties and cakes to see her on her journey. She turned to hug Susan and saw the unmistakable plume of smoke heading in their direction.

Only then did Katherine cry. She'd come so far and achieved so much, and now it was finally time for her to leave. As the train pulled into the station, she gave her farewell party final hugs, then took her ticket from Jim Nelson. He took her bags and saw her to her seat.

The last view she had of her farewell party was of Aiden, running down the platform as if to catch up with the metal beast, before the train rounded a bend and carried her out of their sight.

Chapter Eighteen

THE SUN'S UNRELENTING rays beat down on Catriona. Since Katherine's departure the previous day, she'd sat in her old chair on the back verandah and hadn't moved. As far as she was concerned, her reason to move left yesterday.

She felt that every time a flicker of happiness entered her life that joy was soon reduced to nothing more than ashes. She'd often thought she'd loved Adele. Yet the depth of emotion she had for Katherine went beyond words. She knew Katherine felt the same, but she'd still left. The longer she dwelled on the departure, the more betrayed she felt.

CATRIONA'S STOIC FIGURE was what Susan happened upon when she rode over the next afternoon after Katherine's departure. She could understand why Catriona hadn't farewelled Katherine at the train, but for her to treat Katherine as she did in their final days and hours together was illogical. Reining in her horse, she alighted from the buggy and approached Catriona's imperturbable form.

She knelt beside her. "Don't you think it would be better if you got out of this sun?" She brushed a stray hair from Catriona's forehead. "Have you eaten anything in the past twenty-four hours? Come inside and I'll fix you something to eat. After my ride I'm looking forward to a nice cup of tea." Still Catriona refused to answer. Exasperated, Susan tried another approach. "I know this is hard, but you can't spend the rest of your days sitting here. You've responsibilities to your farm and your livelihood. Besides, if you continue like this and make yourself ill, who do you think is going to help the less fortunate in the district if you don't? You're their shining light."

A flicker of recognition swept across Catriona's face. "Help them? Those same people who, over the past few days, have been more than happy to cast me out?"

"You don't know that. Certainly the ladies' committee was vociferous in their demands for Katherine's removal. I saw no significant interest shown by the greater townsfolk though, or the hardworking landowners to support such a decision. Don't punish them for something they didn't do."

Catriona's blue eyes flashed. "Don't you see? That's just it! They didn't *do* anything either way. They were more than happy not to voice their dissent. It was easier to let her go."

"In much the same manner as *you* did? I didn't see you at the railway station asking Katherine to stay. And from what she told me about your actions on the morning of her departure, you didn't raise a finger to change her mind."

Catriona rose. "How dare you! You know how much I loved her. She knew how I felt, and yet she still left. Nothing I could've said would've stopped her. If you've come to tell me what I should and shouldn't have done, it's too bloody late. Go home, Susan, and leave me. I'll survive, I always do." Catriona's laugh was hollow. "And if I don't, I doubt anyone will weep a tear for my passing."

Susan clicked her tongue. "My God, listen to you, wallowing in your own self pity! I'll grant you your life hasn't been easy. But there've been many others who've had it a lot harder. At the first real test of adversity you falter. Maybe Katherine's leaving *was* for the best."

Catriona angrily strode off the verandah. "I don't have to listen to any more of this. If you're not going to leave, then I will." She reached the barn door but Susan's strong hand halted her.

"You *can* go where ever you like. Though first answer me this. You said she knew how you felt about her. But did you *tell* her, when she most needed to hear it, yesterday before she left?" Susan searched Catriona's face. "You didn't, and I believe that was all it might have taken to get her to stay. The town's folk would've eventually come around. And if they didn't, then to hell with them."

Catriona hung her head. "It's too late. She's gone," she said, her voice thick with emotion.

Susan grasped her shoulders. "Look at me. It's only too late if you allow it to be. Go after her. Bring her back."

"And how do you expect me to find her? Sydney's enormous compared to our one main-street town. I wouldn't know where to start. It would be tantamount to looking for a needle in a haystack. What about the farm while I'm gone? I can't drop everything and leave."

"Strangely enough you were content to allow the farm to go to ruin when I first got here." She grabbed Catriona, impeding her escape. "Listen, the only barriers stopping you from finding her

are the ones *you* place there. Do you remember the dinner last year when, after one too many bottles of claret, we waxed lyrical about life and love?"

"Yes, I do," Catriona replied, a faraway look on her face as if she was recalling the evening.

"You said you believed in fate. If that's the case then look at the chain of events over the past few months. You were the one who went with Jim Nelson to look at any possible damage to the railway station. If it had been any other day than the dust storm, then the ladies' committee would have greeted Katherine and you would've been none the wiser. Had they greeted her, do you think you'd have had any chance of her staying with you? If this had been the case, neither of you would have discovered how you felt for each other.

"Love like what's between the two of you is precious, and it's sure worth going after. If you believe in fate, then you'll find her in Sydney. If you don't, then you were never meant to. But, there's one thing I'm certain of--if you stay here you'll never find her. She'll leave never knowing the depth of your love for her. Go after her, and tell her how you feel and that you want her to stay. As for the farm, I'm sure there are two young men who could capably manage its affairs during your absence."

Catriona shook her head sadly. "She's already a day ahead of me and the next train's not due for another week--"

Susan held up her hand. "She *does* have a day on you--*if* you wait for the next train. But, the Sydney coach comes by here in the next couple of hours, doesn't it? Didn't you say, given its more direct route, it usually beats the train into Sydney? What are you waiting for?"

CATRIONA SQUINTED, HER thoughts in turmoil. Why hadn't she asked her, one more time, to stay? Would it have made any difference? Susan's right. She'd never know unless she tried. If she could only beat the train into the central terminus, she could meet Katherine there and tell her. Despite the crowds it would be easy to pick her out in her infernal habit. This would be one instance where Catriona would be happy to see her wear the painful attire. She turned to Susan. "You win. I'll give it one more try. God only knows I love her, Susan. I've never felt this way for anyone. I doubt I ever will again."

Both women spent the next hour packing and hoping, for once, a seat was still available on the coach. Catriona reconciled, if need be, to ride on top of the luggage, if for no other reason than to give Katherine one more chance.

KATHERINE AWOKE TO a gentle shake of her shoulder. She'd spent her time on the train sharing her third class compartment with a mother and her three children. As the train pulled into the station, Katherine sighed. After non-stop, relentless rattling, she was grateful for the stopover.

"Unfortunately, Sister, this is our stop," the woman said as she handed one of her bags to her eldest. "Thank you for your help with the children. I don't know what I would have done to keep them quiet."

Katherine rose and grabbed one of her suitcases. "I'm sure you would've managed quite commendably. All the best for the rest of your journey."

"And you too, Sister."

Katherine at last found herself alone. She scanned the platform and saw a pie man hawking his merchandise. Leaving the train, she bought a pasty from him and a cup of tea. "Do you normally sell your wares here?" Katherine took a bite.

"Yes, Sister," he replied as he packed his stand into the box at his feet. "I'm finished for the day. You were my last sale."

Katherine washed down the pasty. "I can see why--these are delicious. Could you point me in the direction of the ladies room?"

The pie man blushed. "It's, er, that way Sister."

"Thank you." Katherine walked down to the far end of the station eager to have a wash and, not to mention, the opportunity to finally get out of her habit.

She closed and locked the door behind her, marveling at how timely her request to Me Lin had been. In anticipation of her leaving the Order, Katherine asked her if she could possibly make her a few simple dresses. Me Lin had been happy to accommodate. In light of the recent developments, she'd finished them just in time. An unknowing Susan had delivered the parcel on the day of Katherine's departure.

Returning three hours later to her cabin, she found her entrance blocked by a young, redheaded boy, his face a patchwork of freckles. "Ma says this is *our* cabin. And until she returns I'm to make sure no-one else tries to take it from us."

Katherine smiled at the young boy's defiance. "And a good job you're doing too. But, if you look in the corner you'll see a pint-sized suitcase." She held up her portmanteau. "It matches the one I'm holding. You see, I've been on this train for a while already, and have been in this cabin. I'm sure there's enough space for all of us to share for the rest of the journey. What's your name?"

The boy relaxed at Katherine's calm manner. "Ned O'Riordan. Who are you?"

"My name's Sister." Katherine looked down at her clothing. Too many questions would be asked of a nun travelling in plain clothes. Maybe it was time for her to start her new life, even if it couldn't be with Catriona. "My name's Miss Flynn. By the sound of your voice we come from the same country. Where in Ireland are you from?"

As the boy started to answer, a flustered woman with another child in tow arrived at the door of the carriage. Katherine introduced herself and before long, the group was Sydney-bound. During the remainder of the journey she learned Mrs. O'Riordan's husband had been a prospector out west. After his unfortunate death in a mine cave in, she and her family were returning to Sydney to secure a passage to Tasmania to live with Mrs. O'Riordan's sister and family.

The same polite questions were asked of Katherine and she was stuck. She could hardly tell her who she had been up until recently, or what transpired to take her to Sydney. Embellishing the truth, she explained she was a teacher who had been visiting friends and was now returning to Sydney. The relief in Margaret's eyes was apparent as, at least for a little while, she could rely on Katherine to assist her in keeping the children engaged.

WHEN KATHERINE THOUGHT she could take no more of the continual rattle of the train, they finally approached the outskirts of Sydney. They passed through a number of unique train stations dotted along the track before finally reaching the substantial town of Sydney.

Katherine gazed at the Gothic arches of the Redfern mortuary station. These signaled the impending closure of the first part of her journey home. She peered pensively at the cityscape. What would she do now? She thought she had enough money to get to Circular Quay and book a passage. Then she'd need to buy enough provisions for the journey. She thanked heavens for Susan's gift. She didn't know how she would have eaten without it. She did a rough calculation and determined how much she needed to pay for a night's accommodation. She silently prayed there would be no delay to her sea journey, for she had absolutely no wish to again don the garb of a nun and seek temporary refuge in a convent.

She helped Mrs. O'Riordan and her children down from the carriage, graciously refusing an offer of temporary accommodation with relatives. She was again making her excuses when a solid, yet gentle-faced man grabbed young Ned from behind. Given the striking similarity between man and boy, he was obviously a relative.

"Sean, set the boy down and behave yourself," Margaret O'Riordan insisted, laughter in her voice. "And where are your manners? Introduce yourself to *Miss Flynn* here."

The man turned toward Katherine and in the same motion, steadied Ned on the ground.

The emphasis Margaret had placed on "Miss" was not lost on Katherine. She struggled to hide her embarrassment at the interested look in the man's eyes.

Removing his cap, he offered his hand, "Sean Doherty, Miss Flynn. I'm sorry if I was rude. It's not often I get to see my sister."

Katherine accepted the apology and then politely listened to an overview from Mrs. O'Riordan of what he did for a living. Katherine was bemused. When she'd initially arrived in Sydney as a nun, she'd received nothing but respect and assistance. Such courtesy was still reflected in Sean's

eyes, yet it was accompanied by something else. For the first time since the debacle of her engagement, she saw interest in the eyes of another man. Only then did she realise how careful she'd have to be in Sydney and also during her homeward voyage. Her habit had previously acted as a type of religious shield. Now there would be nothing to protect her from the prying eyes and hands of men. Respectfully refusing one final attempt by Mrs. O'Riordan to invite her to stay, Katherine managed to extricate herself and eventually find a Hansom cab to take her to the Circular Quay booking office.

Travelling down George street which, given its grandeur, was one of the major streets of Sydney, Katherine was amazed at the city's contradictions. The elaborate sandstone architecture of the buildings lining the road announced the abundant availability of the stone. And the newly-built Sydney Town Hall laid testimony to an architectural style more reminiscent of Ireland. The paved footpaths carried men and women bedecked in the latest fashions of the day. In the presence of such civility was a reminder of the rural beginnings of the town. Halted in the shadow of such refinement was a heavily laden bullock dray. The driver, casually attired, paid scant attention to the passing men and women. His focus was trained on adjusting the harness of his team before continuing on his journey.

Just when Katherine finally determined exactly what he was carrying, the Hansom cab she was travelling in lurched sideways. Obviously the town's counsellors had expended all their available funds on building and pavements, for the main street was little more than a pothole-ridden dirt road--not at all like the cobbled streets of her home town in Ireland. Katherine tightened her grip on the door handle when the cab passed the equally ostentatious General Post Office. They turned the corner, and she finally arrived at the birthplace of Australia, Circular Quay.

She politely manoeuvred her way around the numerous hawkers selling their wares, pausing only long enough to ask directions of a constable in charge of a work gang. His directions led her straight to the booking office. She straightened her bonnet and entered.

A middle-aged, bespectacled man looked up from the charts in front of him. "Good morning, Miss, may I help you?"

Katherine balked at the man's use of "Miss" and then recovered herself. "Good morning and, yes, I hope you can. I'd like to book a passage to Ireland as soon as possible. Could you please tell me when the next available boat departs?"

The man smiled. "Well, ma'am, it would be better for you to refer to these fine vessels as ships, unless of course you want to incur the wrath of the Captain." Katherine nodded in mock chastisement. "We do have a ship due to leave port for Ireland. She's set to sail on the fourteenth. If you--"

Katherine was sure the look on her face was what had made the man pause. "That's not for another seven days. Don't you have something leaving sooner?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, it's the best I can do. If I might be so bold, I'd suggest you book now. It doesn't take long for these passages to fill up. If you miss this one, it'll be another month before another ship sails for Ireland."

Taking the man's advice with resignation, Katherine parted with enough money from the funds she was given to book a shared cabin for the long sea journey home.

"Thank you. I'll see you in seven days." Absorbed in securing her ticket, she walked straight into someone. Stepping back and raising her face to apologise, Katherine's jaw dropped. "Adele?"

Katherine looked at Adele's refined features, her mind uncontrollably dragging up an intimate image of Catriona and Adele. She closed her eyes, trying to dismiss such thoughts.

AN EQUALLY SURPRISED Adele looked at Katherine in her plain dress, rather than her habit. She could clearly see the beauty which had so captured Catriona. Despite the unruly wisps of hair struggling to free themselves from her broad-brimmed straw hat, Katherine's emerald green eyes capably accentuated her delicate features. "Katherine, what are you doing here?" She carefully chose her words. "Have you been called home early? Is everything all right with, er, the town?" She caught herself before she could pose the question she was dying to ask as to whether anything had happened between her and Catriona.

"Well, yes and no. But, what of you. I thought you were due to return to England. What happened, did your business keep you here?"

Adele laughed, her eyes crinkling in delight. "My business affairs *did* keep me slightly longer than I'd anticipated, but my delay has been imposed by the vagaries of the sea. The ship I was to sail on foundered in Bass Strait and barely managed to limp into Port Phillip Bay. I'm not due to sail for another ten days. That's what brought me here this morning. I was about to check with Mr. Jamieson to ensure my return journey had not again been delayed." Adele's last words were said loudly enough within the confines of the cramped office to ensure their intended recipient heard them.

Doffing an imaginary cap, the man who had previously served Katherine checked the book in front of him. "I've had no reports of any difficulties with your ship. She's due to arrive in Sydney on the seventeenth, weather permitting."

Adele nodded her thanks and turned to Katherine. "Where are you staying? Maybe we can take tea. I'd very much like to catch up on any news you might have of the town." She looked at Katherine's downcast features. Ushering her out of the office and the prying ears of Mr. Jamieson, Adele took Katherine's hand. "What's wrong?"

"It's a long story. I'd like to speak with you. But first I've got to find somewhere inexpensive to stay. I didn't expect a seven-day wait in Sydney, but my funds should be enough to secure me a room in an inn for the intervening period."

Adele shook her head. "The inns of Sydney are not like those in Ireland. They're no place for a woman, much less a nun. I'm currently staying at Petty's Family Hotel and I've more than enough room for us to share. I'd be very offended if you refuse. After all, I couldn't bear to think what might happen to you if I let you stay in one of those hovels. I don't think the church would ever forgive me," she finished lightheartedly, still perplexed over Katherine's absence of religious attire.

"Thank you. I promise I won't be much of a nuisance. Maybe after I'm settled we can get something to eat and I can tell you what's happened since you left."

Adele strove to read Katherine's features but found them closed. Something incredibly significant has occurred. That much she was sure of. She tried to collect her thoughts. Why was Katherine in a dress? Finding her in the booking office could only mean she was booking a passage to return to Ireland. Was this so she could finalise matters with the convent prior to returning to Catriona? Despite Katherine's silence, her non-verbal cues spoke volumes. Katherine was desperately unhappy.

EXCEPTING A NEAR collision when they left the Circular Quay yards, the trip to the understated, yet exclusive, hotel was silent. Katherine was engrossed in her own thoughts. Thinking back to the first time she and Catriona had made love, Katherine recalled their discussion regarding Adele's sudden departure. Catriona told her Adele had gleaned an involvement between the two of them at the dinner party, and left to give their feelings the chance to grow. Katherine blushed at the realisation that Adele had read her so well. Even though embarrassed, she was relieved. At least with Adele she'd be able to express what had happened, without shocking her.

Katherine followed Adele to the rented room and quickly attended to the accumulated dirt and grime of her train journey. Both women then left for the tearooms of George Street and a well-deserved meal.

CATRIONA NO SOONER alighted from her journey in the bone-jarring coach when she hailed a cab and jumped in. "Central station please."

"Certainly," the driver replied and cracked his whip.

Sitting in the confines of the coach, her thoughts strayed to Katherine and the train journey she'd taken. She dwelled on the length of Katherine's journey and cursed. Despite the coach usually being the more reliable means of travel, she and the rest of its passengers had been forced into an unscheduled halt at the foot of the Blue Mountains due to a broken rear axle. Replacing it took the greater part of the night, with the coach departing very early the next morning.

Catriona prayed the delay wouldn't hinder her attempts to, one last time, convince Katherine to return with her to Gleneagle. Pausing only long enough to pay the driver, she grabbed her bag and ran for the station.

Arriving at the platform her heart sank. While the train was there, the station was bereft of any passengers. Collapsing onto one of the railway seats dotted along the platform, she struggled to come to grips with what to do next.

"Excuse me, sir, can I help you?" Catriona looked at the porter in front of her. It hadn't been the first time during her journey she'd been mistaken for a man. Given her clothing, the assumption was a reasonable one. And, given the greater freedom of men to move unhindered through an established town the size of Sydney, she saw no need to correct him. After all, her voice had always held a low timbre--, something her mother had regretted, but was now potentially to her benefit.

"Has the Western weekly arrived yet?" A sinking feeling filled the pit of her stomach when he nodded.

"It arrived about half an hour ago. We're cleaning it now for the return service. Would you like to book a passage? It's due to leave at about twelve fifteen this afternoon."

For a fleeting moment she was tempted to call an end to it and book her trip home. How in the hell was she supposed to find Katherine in a city of this size? Mentally cursing Susan's suggestion, the coach's broken axle, and her own stupidity she almost didn't hear the porter repeat his question.

"Sir, do you want me to book you a journey home? There are still a number of first class carriages available for the return journey."

Catriona's eyes widened and she slapped her leg. The first thing she would do if she were Katherine would be to book a sea passage home. Maybe she was still doing that. "No thank you. Can you hail me a cab please?"

Her urging the driver to get to the Quay as fast as possible almost resulted in them causing an accident. As the Hansom entered the enclosure of the booking office yard they nearly careened into a cab containing two women departing the yards. Ignoring the curses of the other driver, Catriona sprang down from her cab, hoping the two ladies hadn't been harmed. She strode toward the booking office.

Mr. Jamieson gazed up from his tables. "Good morning, sir, can I help you?"

She placed her bag on the floor and glanced at the man's nametag. "Yes, Mr., er, Jamieson," she said with a calmness that belied how she actually felt. "I'd like some information on a passenger if I may."

Mr. Jamieson furrowed his brows. "I'm sorry, sir, but it's the policy of this office not to provide information regarding the nature of people booking passages."

Catriona forced herself to remain calm while deep down all she wanted to do was reach across, grab the man by the shirt, and shake him senseless until the information fell from him. "And a sensible policy it is. After all, the privacy of your passengers must be maintained at all costs. Would it be possible then for you to tell me when the next ship is due to sail for Ireland?"

"Indeed I can. The next ship to Ireland is not due to sail until the fourteenth. Would you like to book a passage?"

"No, that's fine." Besides, the last thing she wanted to do was to be stuck on a ship with a woman who didn't want her there. "I do have one more question. Have any nuns booked a passage to Ireland?"

"No, sir, not that I can recall."

"The person I'm looking for is a nun. Would it be possible for you could keep an eye out for her? She's a friend of the family. I missed saying goodbye to her when she left." Catriona reached into her pocket and pulled out a roll of notes. "I know a man such as you must be too busy to look for someone as specific as a nun. I'm certainly willing to cover any inconvenience this may cause."

"Yes, it is a busy job," he replied, as he greedily held out his hand. "But I know what it's like when you don't get to say goodbye before family sail overseas. I tell you what. The *Elizabeth* sails at four o'clock on the afternoon of the fourteenth. If you return here before the ship sails, I'll let you know if there have been any such passengers."

Catriona uttered her thanks as she handed over what she thought was an adequate sum to cover any 'inconvenience' caused. "I'm going to remain in Sydney at least until the ship sails. Could you recommend a place where I might stay?"

"There are a number of taverns about the town which would be more than suitable for you. The Princess Royal on Hunter Street is one of the more reputable establishments."

Catriona shook her head, as she recalled one previous visit to Sydney, when she'd boarded there.

"Of course it can become rowdy once the sun goes down. Possibly a hotel would be more to your liking? Then might I recommend the Petty's Family Hotel? It's on church hill. Any driver will be able to take you there."

She thanked the man and left the office, wondering when Katherine was going to book a passage home. Maybe she'd been side tracked. If that were the case, then Catriona's last chance would be on the day the boat was sailing, which was seven days away. How was she to occupy her time until then?

She made her way to Petty's Family establishment where, tired and bedraggled, she booked herself a room for the week and ordered a well-deserved bath. Busy with signing the register, she didn't see the two women she'd nearly crashed into at the shipping yards cross the reception room and leave the hotel.

KATHERINE FOLLOWED ADELE and the waiter as they weaved around the other seated diners, finally arriving at a quiet corner of the tearoom. Taking a seat, Adele ordered for them both. She waited until the waiter was a safe distance away. "Pardon my audacity, Katherine, but what's going on?"

Katherine looked down at her tightly clasped hands, wondering where to begin. "Catriona told me about you and her." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Adele's brow twitched, as if her composed exterior had been slightly breached. Casting her eyes in the direction of the other diners and seeing they were ensconced in their own conversations, she returned her gaze to Katherine. "If she told you then that could naturally only mean one thing. Do you and Catriona share a similar relationship?"

Katherine's blushed furiously. "Yes, we did," she replied quietly, her face downcast. She jumped at the soft feel of Adele's hand on her own.

"You needn't be worried. I'm not about to leave in disgust. That would be a bit hypocritical, don't you think?" Katherine nodded. "I sensed something between the two of you. And the night of the dinner-- I'm terribly sorry I walked in on you. I assure you, my actions were unintentional."

Adele searched Katherine's face. "Pardon my bluntness, but what are you doing in Sydney? You don't have to answer me if you don't want to, but were Catriona's feelings for you not the same as you felt for her? Was it all too much for you?"

Katherine looked at Adele. How could she tell her that in Catriona's arms she'd finally felt at home. Yet, despite feeling so, she'd left her? "No, it wasn't too much, and the feeling was mutual." She laughed ruefully. "After a number of false starts we finally admitted our feelings for each other. My decision to leave the convent was the next obvious step, so I approached Father Cleary." Adele's eyes widened. "Rest assured, I didn't tell him the *whole* story, regarding my leaving the Order. I told him I was no longer comfortable continuing my religious calling." Katherine paused when the waiter returned with a plate of sandwiches and refreshments.

Satisfied the man was at a respectable distance, Adele looked at Katherine. "Is that why you're returning to Ireland, to get dispensation to leave the convent?"

Katherine couldn't stop the tears welling in her eyes. "That's not exactly the truth, although it's one thing I'll see to on my return. We were caught by the young Greystone girl, kissing on the way to town." She paused at Adele's quiet gasp.

Katherine dabbed her eyes. "I know it was a foolish indiscretion, and given the day again we'd have never let it happen. But it did. I'm sure you can imagine the reaction of the ladies' committee. I truly believe if they could have organised it, they would've seen to our lynching. Instead they settled for me leaving town."

"What did Catriona do through all of this? She doesn't strike me as someone who'd take such treatment lying down."

"She wouldn't if she'd been given the choice. If you could have seen the reaction of the father, you would've understood what I had to do. Catriona's livelihood relies on her receiving a good price for her crop and her cattle. That was unlikely to occur if I remained. I couldn't bear to see her and the farm waste away because of me. I didn't want her to carry the simmering resentment which might have arisen from her being made an outcast. So I decided to leave. I knew Catriona would never ask me to go. And, if I stayed, I don't think she would have managed to keep the farm."

"Did she try to stop you?"

Katherine sadly smiled. "At first she did, when I tried to explain why I was doing what I was doing. But as it came closer to my departure, she acted like she didn't care anymore. She stopped speaking to me and refused to take me to the station. On my last day I barely managed to get any words from her at all." She paused then quietly added, "I think she was glad to see me gone."

ADELE SAT BACK in her chair. She had dealt with her stubborn charge often enough to recognise a defence mechanism when she saw it. As a teenager, withdrawing into herself had been Catriona's way in dealing with pain. Feigning indifference had caused many a frustrating time when she'd been her governess. "Are you telling me she made no move to tell you to stay?" Katherine nodded. "Do you love her?"

Silent tears fell down Katherine's face. "Yes." She again reached into the folds of her dress for a handkerchief.

"Believe me when I tell you she loves you, and the last thing she'd have wanted was for you to leave. Go back, Katherine. Tell her you love her, and be damned with what the townsfolk say or do. If you feel half as much for her as what she does for you, there'll be no issue with your return."

"How can you say that? You weren't there. You didn't see how she acted on the final day. And what about the farm? If I return I doubt the townsfolk's position on our relationship will have changed. And what if she doesn't take me back? I've barely enough funds as it is. I'm sorry, Adele. As much as this hurts, and believe me when I tell you it's like a suppurating wound, I can't go back. It's best I return to Ireland. In time, Catriona's life will go on. As days pass, her memories of me will fade, along with the pain she's currently suffering. It's for the best."

"I don't think so, Katherine. I really don't." Sensing closure to their discussion, at least for the moment, Adele took a sip from her now lukewarm tea.

OVER THE ENSUING days Katherine politely weathered Adele's repeated attempts to convince her to try at least one more time with Catriona. Despite her efforts, Adele's pleas fell on deaf ears. In response to her attempts, Katherine steered the conversation back to Adele, and her time as a governess in both Australia and England.

When she wasn't drawing Adele into conversation regarding her times as a governess, Katherine deferred to discussions involving Adele's imminent departure, and her plans on returning to England. Strangely enough, Adele was evasive with her, preferring not to disclose her travel plans. Even on the second day of their stay, when she'd left Katherine at the hotel under the auspices of a visit to the booking office, Adele made only passing references to her business at the office on her return. Katherine ceased quizzing her on the topic, assuming Adele had an aversion to long journeys.

In Katherine's remaining days in the country Adele couldn't do enough for her. After questioning her on her attire for the journey and finding it lacking, she had taken her shopping at the David Jones Emporium, politely but firmly refusing any payment from Katherine.

Visiting the gardens of the Domain, they strolled in the imposing crenellated shadows of Government House, talking about every topic possible except Catriona. Adele shared with Katherine tales of her more private life, and Katherine was reassured by her words that she was not alone. Within London society, relationships like the one she and Catriona had shared were, if not common, at least present. Despite her reassurances, Katherine only had thoughts for the company of one other woman----Catriona.

When they weren't taking in the sights of Sydney, both were content to spend their evening hours at the hotel, taking tea in the parlour prior to retiring early for bed.

AFTER A PERIOD of interminable waiting, the day of Katherine's departure finally arrived.

Katherine woke very early and gazed at the form in the other bed. She was relieved Adele wasn't yet awake. She'd been a godsend over these past few days, but now Katherine needed some time to herself.

Her thoughts drifted to her sea journey. She knew once she stepped on the ship she'd never return to Australia and Catriona, and she silently grieved at the thought. Would she ever find anyone who moved her like Catriona did? In all honesty she doubted she'd ever again experience such depth of emotion. At least if she could secure a position as a governess, then she'd have some joy in her life. Katherine quietly dressed for the long journey ahead.

Later in the morning Katherine was on her way, accompanied by Adele. "You know I could have made this trip myself."

Adele glanced out the window of the cab at two well-dressed women in close conversation and then returned her gaze to Katherine. "I'm well aware of that, but what sort of friend would I be to allow you to commence such a long journey without being there to say goodbye?"

Katherine tilted toward Adele when the cab entered the shipyard. Righting herself, she saw the three masts and extensive rigging of what could only have been the *Elizabeth*. All of a sudden her departure was all too real. Using every last ounce of her composure, Katherine paid and thanked the driver and he took up a position on the cab rank.

Katherine and Adele made their way through the crowd to the booking office. They hadn't gone far when a rather burly porter approached them.

Doffing his cap he introduced himself. "Afternoon, ladies. Are you travelling on the *Elizabeth* this fine afternoon?"

Adele graciously nodded. "I'm not, but my friend here is one of the passengers. Could you please arrange for her luggage to be stowed on board?"

Once again doffing his cap in obeisance, he took the cases from Adele and Katherine.

Katherine looked around. "Oh no, I left my book on the seat of the cab. Adele, I'll go back for it before our driver gets another fare. I'll meet you at the booking office." Without a backward glance Katherine made her way into the throng of people.

AFTER PAYING THE porter a hasty gratuity to ensure Katherine's entire belongings made their way aboard, Adele walked to the booking office. Stepping through the door she looked across the room and straight into the eyes of a woman she would continue to love all her life. In front of her was Catriona, dressed as she so often was in moleskins and a sky blue shirt.

A surprised Catriona closed the distance between them. "Adele, what are you doing here? I thought you'd be on your way by now."

Grabbing Catriona's arm, Adele guided her outside and away from the prying ears of Mr. Jamieson. "What am *I* doing here? Who cares what I'm doing here? Did you get the telegram I sent you?"

"What telegram? I didn't receive any telegram. What are you talking about?"

"I sent you one five days ago, telling you to come at once if you wanted any chance of a relationship between you and Katherine." Adele paused at Catriona's look of surprise. "I can't believe you let her walk out without trying to stop her. Shame on you! Didn't I teach you better

manners than that? And you should think yourself lucky I happened to be in this yard the day Katherine booked her passage. God knows where she would've ended staying. As it is, she's been sharing a room with me at Petty's Family Hotel for the last seven days."

Adele didn't think it possible that anyone could look as incredulous as Catriona did.

"Petty's on church Hill? My God, I've been there for the past few days, working out a plan to get her to return with me to Gleneagle. I was banking on speaking with her today when she came to board."

Catriona struck herself on the side of the leg. "If I'd spent more time in the parlour rather than moping in my room, this might've been resolved by now."

"You've got one last chance to convince her to stay. Be patient, but persistent. I honestly believe she wants to stay but she needs to hear it from you. And in a manner which doesn't resemble you talking to one of your blessed cattle. And above all, she loves you, don't forget that."

UNABLE TO CONTROL herself, Catriona closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around the somewhat startled woman. "Thank you. You don't know how much I wanted to hear those words. I honestly think today signals a new beginning for us."

"Yes, I've no doubt it does," came the cold voice from behind them.

Catriona opened her eyes and stared at Katherine's rigid form.

Breaking away from their embrace, Adele also turned to see Katherine's barely controlled ire.

Katherine pointed an accusing finger at Adele. "You! After all I told you about Catriona and me, this is how you pay me back? So that's why you've been so evasive about your travel arrangements. And your surreptitious trip to the booking office. You weren't confirming your trip, you were canceling it!"

"That's not it at all," Adele said. "The times I left you were not to go to the booking office, although this proved a convenient excuse. I went to the General Post Office to telegraph Catriona. There's a reasonable explanation for what you just saw and heard--"

Katherine cut her off. "I'm sure there is. With me out of the way you could return to Catriona. I'm sure today does signal a new beginning for you both. However, it'll definitely be one without *me* in it."

Turning on her heel, Katherine ran back into the crowd and toward the waiting ship.

CATRIONA WAS STUNNED into stillness by the vehemence of Katherine's words.

Adele laughed. "Oh God, Catriona, she's a fine one. Go after her before it's too late. Tell her what that was about and what you mean to her. Now, go!" She pushed a shocked Catriona in the direction of Katherine's retreating back.

Galvanised into action, Catriona took after the woman she wanted to share the rest of her life with. If she physically had to restrain Katherine and carry her from the ship, she resolved she would, if not for anything else than to give each of them one more chance.

She cursed when her headway was impeded by men and livestock travelling in the same direction. She arrived at the gangplank in time to see Katherine move to the other side of the ship.

Reaching the gangplank, her progress was halted by a slightly built porter. She tried to move around him and failed.

"Excuse me, sir. Can I see your ticket?"

"I don't have a ticket. But I do need to speak to someone on this vessel. It'll only take a minute and then I'll happily get off and you can be on your way." Again the man in front of her blocked her passage.

"I'm sorry, sir, but without a ticket you can't board the ship. How do I know you're not a stowaway?"

"You don't know I'm *not* a stowaway either. But there's something you should know. If you value your life you'll let me embark this vessel. I must speak to the lady who just boarded. I'm going up there, come hell or high water." With one mighty shove, Catriona pushed the man aside and ran up gangway.

Closing the distance between the two of them, she managed to call out Katherine's name but she was yet again halted, this time by two extremely well-built sailors.

"Where are you going then? Do you think you can thump people and hop on a ship at a whim? If you're not a paying passenger then you're an attempted stowaway. We hand your type over to the constabulary."

Catriona wrestled to break free from the vice-like grips of the two men holding her. "Don't be absurd! All I want to do is have a few quiet words with her." Catriona inclined her head in the direction of Katherine's shocked features.

The older of the two men looked to where Catriona had motioned and then back at her. "Strangely enough, she doesn't look like she wants to talk to you. What sort of man are you, accosting fine ladies in such a manner..."

Catriona brought her booted heel down on the foot of the vile smelling man, causing him to yell in pain and loosen his grip.

"You bastard, I'll make you sorry for that!"

Before she could get any closer to Katherine, Catriona's stomach was impaled on the hand of the angry man. Doubling over in pain with stars dancing in her head, the last thing Catriona heard when she was soundly hit across the head was Katherine screaming her name.

LINGERING ON THE periphery of consciousness, Catriona was vaguely aware of her head being cradled in Katherine's lap. Through barely open eyes, she could just make out a heated conversation between an angry Katherine and a somewhat contrite sailor. Adele's voice was also there, calming the angry woman.

"I'm sorry, miss. With her dressed the way she was and all--I thought she was a man aiming to do no good. I'd never have hit her if I knew she was a woman." He stopped and gulped at Katherine seething features. "After all, how could anyone tell?" he defiantly protested. "Women shouldn't dress like that. It's not natural."

"What's not natural about it? She's a grazier, for heaven's sake!" Katherine looked at the tied back hair of the sailor in front of her. "And what about your pigtail--is *that* natural? I thought only girls wore pigtails."

Seeing his look of dismay, Katherine calmed down. "I know sailors have worn their hair like that for many years. How she's dressed is the way farmers have dressed for many years. Just as hair in your eyes would hinder your ability to do your job, so would her wearing a dress in her line of work. I thank you both for coming to my defence. Just don't be so eager in the future to jump to conclusions." Katherine stopped when yet another man entered the scene.

He consulted his fob watch and then tucked it back in the folds of his vest. "By my reckoning, it's now three fifty five, and this ship sails at four o'clock sharp. If you're staying, then stay. If you're not, then leave my ship or *I* will have you thrown off, female or otherwise."

Before she could take issue with the man's tone, the crowd around them quickly dissipated leaving Adele, Katherine, and Catriona. Feeling the weight of Catriona shift in her lap, Katherine lovingly looked down into Catriona's face as she fully opened her eyes.

"I love you, Katherine, and I don't want you to leave. I'm sorry I acted like I did when you left. I didn't handle the situation at all well. We'll work through this, I promise." Taking Katherine's hand in her own, Catriona placed a delicate kiss in her palm.

"Come home with me, please."

She looked down on Catriona's pleading eyes. "I'm already home, my love. Wherever you are, be it Gleneagle, a shack, or the deck of a ship, as long as I'm with you I'll always be home."

Epilogue

The scandal of Katherine's return took the better part of a month to die down. Its dissipation was aided through the advent of an even greater scandal. As it so unfolded, Miss Greystone had done more than go riding on the fateful day she'd made her shocking discovery. Six weeks after Katherine's initial departure, Miss Greystone developed a bulge consistent with someone expecting a child. While the Greystone family hung their heads in shame, the poorer families of the district quietly rejoiced.

So great was the ignominy felt by Mrs. Greystone, she packed up herself and her daughter and left for Sydney and an extended trip to the continent till Elsbeth's size was reduced. Without her outspoken and waspish presence, the remainder of the ladies' committee lost their momentum. They became content to busy themselves with discrete, select tea parties, leaving the rest of the town and, in particular, Catriona and Katherine to their own devices.

Almost three months passed when Catriona held a dinner party, inviting Susan, Me Lin, William, and Robert. The dinner held even greater significance. Instead of an English-style meal, Me Lin treated the group to a traditional Chinese repast of sweet and spicy oriental dishes, surprising even Susan with her culinary skill. Robert and William had become regular visitors to Catriona and Katherine's home, and had on more than one occasion spent the night. Sometimes Catriona couldn't help but shake her head at the greater freedom of men compared to women.

Almost five months passed since Katherine's initial departure when the postmaster received a letter from Ireland addressed to Sister Flynn. A tireless supporter of the work of the ladies' committee, he elected to redirect the letter to who he felt was a more appropriate recipient-- Father Cleary. The father sourly smiled when he read the contents of the letter which first mentioned how sorry the Mother Superior was about Sister Flynn's decision. Given the Mother Superior wasn't in the habit of tying people to something they didn't want to be associated with, she told Katherine she'd honour her resolution to leave the convent. The Mother Superior praised Katherine's choice to remain in the district and advised her that when the convent had saved enough money, she would send another nun to the town.

At the nine-month mark the new nun arrived. Unlike Katherine, both the ladies' committee and Father Cleary afforded the new sister a distinguished reception at the train station, before she was whisked off to the home of Mrs. Monteith. Sister Gordon was a woman in the twilight of her years who was very taken by the welcome she'd received. In return she was quite content to spend the better part of her days regaling the ladies with stories of the Mother Country.

With Sister Gordon's time dominated by such matters, hardly any time remained for her to care for the less fortunate families of the district. As Susan had correctly surmised, it didn't take long for the poorer families to come to grips with the somewhat bohemian relationship shared between Catriona and Katherine. After some initial misgivings and, at the prompting of the influential Connor clan, families within the community accepted Katherine's teaching of their children. As the years passed, and more children found doors opened to them by virtue of the education this fine woman had provided, they couldn't help but wonder what had been the major issue in the first place.

As time went on, the town accepted the two eccentric women who lived outside of town. Unlike the ladies' committee, which eventually petered into obscurity, their love for each other grew, and they spent the rest of their lives in blissful peace surrounded by true friends.

About the Author

Helen currently lives in Tasmania, Australia, with her partner, Kate, and their two cats. When not working, she enjoys writing, reading, bushwalking, civilised camping and the occasional (well frequent) glass of red wine. When she isn't occupied with work and other such matters, she and Kate can be found in the backyard of their home, nestled in the foothills of Mount Wellington, being employed as playthings for their cats.

Other By Helen Macpherson

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Jo Ashby is a reporter narrating and producing the 'Where are They Now?' series, a program focusing on well-known people who have left fame behind, instead opting for a different direction in life. Her subject for the final program is the enigmatic Lauren Wheatley who, despite Jo's best efforts, evades her attempts at an interview.

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