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January

Cathie stood in the shadow of a big gum tree near the lake and stared across at her mother and step-father, who were standing on the long veranda of Lizabrook homestead. She felt a sharp pang of jealousy at how close they always seemed, how much they still loved one another. At eighteen, she was of an age to want a man of her own, but since she and her family lived in the depths of the Australian bush, she wasn't likely to find one. She wanted other things, too, and if she'd been a man she'd have found a way to become a doctor. She'd been patching up her brothers, sisters, and all the family pets since she had developed an interest in the workings of living bodies at the age of nine.

But women weren't allowed to become doctors. It sometimes seemed to her women weren't allowed to do anything but marry and have babies and do endless housework and washing.

Feeling even more restless than usual she walked a few paces further on, taking care to keep out of sight. She stared down at the grave of her real father. Would things have been different if Josiah Ludlam had lived? She didn't really know because her mother rarely spoke of him, but Cathie doubted it.

Picking up some twigs and gum nuts, she began to vent her frustration by hurling them into the water. She had to find a way to escape from here or she would go mad with frustration. Even the lake wasn't a real lake, she thought scornfully, but a band of shallow

water lying beside a half-cleared swamp. It could look really pretty if her step-father ever found the time to clear the rest of the swamp, but he was always too busy. All he cared about was that the half-dug lake gave them enough water to last through the long, hot summers. They weren't gentry to need fancy gardens for parading round in. Her real father had been gentry, though, and her mother had once said that the lake had been his idea.

"In another of your black moods?" a voice teased and she turned to smile at Brendan, her childhood playmate.

He smiled back, his teeth showing white against his dark skin. He was very like his mother's people, as if his body refused to acknowledge the part played in his creation by his Irish father, though his next brother's skin was much paler than his.

"Don't you ever get tired of living here at Lizabrook?" Cathie demanded.

His smile faded. "You know I do. But at least I'm treated like a human being here. The minute I leave the homestead people treat me like an animal—and a worthless one at that—because of this." He jabbed at his skin.

She reached out to squeeze his arm. They were both misfits, but it was even harder for him. Maybe that was what drew them together. She was closer to him than to her half-brothers. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure they were out of sight of the homestead, she took off her shoes and rolled down her stockings. "Let's have a paddle. It's so hot today."

"Aren't you supposed to be helping your mother?"

Cathie shrugged. "The housework will still be there when I get back." It always was. Boring, dreary work, the same day after day.

Liza Caine stood on the verandah and leaned against her husband, enjoying both the feel of his arm around her shoulders and the sea breeze which had just begun to blow, bringing

some welcome cooler air. Smoke was drifting across from the big external kitchen where Dinny was baking bread and roasting meat, for everyone at the homestead took the main meal of the day together. If you listened carefully you could hear Dinny singing one of the little aboriginal songs that went with the various daily tasks. Her friend seemed to have a song for everything.

Liza and Benedict often stood here together for a few moments before the midday meal, chatting quietly of this and that. She and her third husband had been happy together for thirteen years now, but with five young folk about the place it was sometimes difficult for them to find time alone. Their two younger children, Josie and Harry, were still in the schoolroom with Frau Hebel. Finding the money for a governess was a strain, but they weren't close enough to a school for daily attendance and both of them wanted their children to be decently educated, so when a friend had told them about Ilse and said she wanted to find a position in the country, they had appointed her simply on the friend's recommendation, and had not regretted it.

From the far side of the house came the sound of Dinny's husband, Fergal, whistling happily as he worked in the small furniture manufactory in which he and Benedict were partners and which supplemented their farm income. Sadly, this had not done as well as they hoped because there simply weren't enough people with spare money in the colony of Western Australia to sell to, even though the pieces were beautifully crafted and embellished with Benedict's skilled carving. And some people were such snobs they were certain colonial goods must be inferior and therefore only wanted furniture which had been brought out from the mother country. The same people continued to talk about England as "home", but Liza didn't feel like that. Western Australia was her home now.

Across the beige, sun-burned grass of the paddock two figures came into view, arms waving as they paused to argue about something.

“That’s where Cathie’s got to, is it?” Liza muttered, frowning across at her elder daughter. “I told her to give the parlour a good bottoming today. Just wait till she gets within reach of my tongue! And wasn’t Brendan supposed to be working in the vegetable garden, Benedict?”

“He was indeed. He’ll never make a farm worker, that one. But he’s Fergal and Dinny’s problem, not ours. I only pay him day rates now for the times he actually works.” Benedict glanced down at his wife’s troubled face, thinking as he often did that she looked too young and pretty to have grown-up children. “I’m getting worried about Cathie. Be honest, love. She’s been causing you a lot of trouble lately, hasn’t she?”

Liza sighed. On good days her daughter was energetic and lively, making everyone around her feel happy—but the good days were getting fewer and she had taken to slipping away instead of helping about the house, spending hours tramping through the woods like a truant child. If these outings had made Cathie happy, Liza would have been more tolerant of them, but lately nothing seemed to please her daughter. “I don’t know what to do with her, that’s for sure,” she admitted.

“It’s about time I had a word with that young madam.” Benedict silenced his wife’s protest with a kiss. “She claims she’s a woman grown, but she certainly doesn’t act like it.”

Liza hesitated for a moment then said quietly, “She needs to meet people, see new things and I don’t think she’ll settle down otherwise. And a lass of her age needs to meet young men, too.”

Benedict made a soft exasperated sound. “She’s too young to be thinking of marriage.”

“I was carrying a child by the time I was her age,” Liza pointed out.

“Not by your own choice!” he snapped.

Liza closed her eyes as his words brought back the memories of just why she had come to Australia. Her father had wanted her to marry their neighbour, a widower of thirty-five,

and when she had refused Teddy Marshall had raped her, to make sure she would have to marry him. Only she hadn't. She'd run away to Australia instead, sailing with her former employers, the Pringles, as their maid.

On board ship she'd discovered she was pregnant and then Josiah Ludlam had married her, wanting the child more than he wanted her, for he'd never touched her as a wife. And that child had been Cathie. Was it any wonder that with a father like Teddy Marshall Cathie wasn't an easy girl to manage? And yet she was a warm, loving girl, the first to rush and help you in times of trouble.

Liza realised Benedict has asked her something. "Sorry, my mind was wandering."

"I was saying we can't afford to send Cathie back to England for a visit, let alone spare someone to go with her."

"We could if we sold some of the jewellery." She had inherited some pretty pieces from her first husband and they must be worth something.

"We can manage without touching that, thank you. I can't leave the farm and I don't want to lose my wife for a whole year, thank you very much, and the other children need you just as much as Cathie does, especially Josie."

"We could send her back on her own."

"And where would she stay when she got there? I've not heard from my brothers in England since my parents died."

She knew that hurt him. Losing touch with your family was common out here, though. "You've got your sister here. You see her and her family sometimes."

"Once a year, if I'm lucky." Benedict stared blindly out across the lake.

After a moment's silence Liza resumed the discussion. "Cathie keeps asking about the Ludlams lately. Do you think we should tell her the truth about who her real father is? She

wants to know why her father's family never try to contact her and yesterday she threatened to write to them. Well, she knows I keep in touch with Sophia Ludlam."

He made an angry growling sound in his throat. "Eh, that wouldn't do. Mrs Ludlam's no connection of Cathie's, for all the lass bears their name. I think we're going to have to tell her the truth. We can't go on like this, love."

"Perhaps we should make up some tale—say it was a stranger who attacked me and left me pregnant? If she ever met her real father, it'd break her heart." Liza shuddered. You never forgot it when a man raped you, as Teddy Marshall had done when she was eighteen. And the older Cathie grew, the more she resembled the Marshalls, for she was a tall, sturdy girl with a strong temper and a stubborn determination to get what she wanted from life—though she could be kind, too, and had a way with children and sick people that was nothing short of miraculous. Her younger brothers and sisters adored her, as did Dinny and Fergal's children.

Fortunately, in Cathie the strong Marshall features had softened and she had her mother's thick dark hair, not their sparse beige-brown locks. Liza had told her many a time that she would be pretty if she would only stop frowning at the world, but Cathie considered herself too tall and solidly built, complaining that no man would ever love a great lump like her.

"It was a lot easier when they were younger," Benedict muttered. "Now there's Lucas saying he wants to see a bit of the world before he settles down, though at least he wants to see the rest of Australia, not go back to England."

"It's easier for a young man to travel and anyway, he's not so angry at the world as she is. Lucas is very sensible. His mother would have been very proud of him, I'm sure, if she'd lived."

He looked down at Liza indulgently and could not resist planting a kiss on her rosy cheek. “We have a confusion of children between us, don’t we, my love? One of mine, one of yours, and three of ours.”

“And another of mine whom I never see.” Her voice broke as she said that, for her son Francis had been taken away from her by her second husband’s family and had grown up in England. His loss was an abiding sadness.

Benedict gave her another hug and said bracingly, “They’re a fine healthy brood, thank God, except for Josie—and even she’s been better this year.”

Liza hesitated, wondering whether to tell him she might be expecting another child, but decided against it. It was too early yet to be sure and she’d had false alarms before. Besides this had taken her by surprise, and she was not yet used to the idea of becoming a mother again.

Cathie and Brendan strolled by the edge of the lake for a while longer, both reluctant to return home and face a scolding.

Suddenly he sniffed the air. “I can smell burning. The kitchen roof hasn’t caught fire again, has it?”

They both swung round and saw the blue-grey smoke rising behind the house.

“Hell, that’s a bush fire—and the wind’s blowing it in this direction!” Brendan was starting to run towards the house even as he spoke.

Cathie raced after him, her skirts flapping about her legs and her boots pounding the ground, the untied laces whipping from side to side.

Bush fires were the thing everyone feared most in summer. They could destroy your life in an hour.

At almost the same moment, Benedict also stopped talking in mid-sentence to sniff the air, rush round the veranda and stare at the woods behind the house. "Oh my god! Liza, that's a big one! Let's hope our fire breaks will keep it back."

Even as he spoke, the sea breeze seemed to grow stronger and they heard the dreaded roaring and crackling sounds of a fire gone on the rampage.

He ran to ring the emergency bell that would summon everyone on the farm. Even before he had let go of the rope he saw Brendan and Cathie running towards him and other people coming out of the various outbuildings. They all knew what to do, because Benedict made them practise at the start of every summer. So far the cleared land had protected them, but this fire had a strong sea breeze behind it and was gaining ground fast.

Under the governess's supervision Josie and Harry rushed to gather some treasured possessions and clothes, stuffing them into the sacks kept in their bedrooms for that purpose. Liza did the same for herself and Benedict, then left Ilse to shepherd her charges down to the lake. Benedict had deliberately left a small spit of land jutting out into the water when he dug out the original swamp, because like all settlers he knew the dangers of bush fires.

Dinny's two youngest children were already rushing along the edge of the lake to join them, carrying some of their own family's possessions.

Liza dumped the box containing the family's main valuables on the ground by the water's edge and cast a quick glance at the sky behind the house, horrified to see how quickly the fire was spreading. A dark haze of smoke blurred the skyline now and below it flames were shooting high, racing along the ground and leaping from tree-top to tree-top as well. If only the breeze would drop! She decided to bring out a few more things, just in case. "Josie, you stay here and keep an eye on the little ones. You two boys go back to the houses and grab whatever clothes and blankets you can. Anything useful. But keep an eye on the fire."

Josie nodded, her thin face even paler than usual. With her tendency to wheeze, it was no use her trying to do things in a hurry. Harry, who was almost as big as she was though nearly three years younger, was already rushing back towards the house.

A chain of people formed to swing buckets of water up from the lake while Benedict dumped their contents on the wooden shingles of the roof, for the rainwater barrels were empty at this time of year. Liza was torn between saving possessions from the house and joining the others. Benedict shouted, "Get out what you can—just in case. Ilse, you help her! Brendan, get the animals out and shepherd them towards the water."

By the time Liza made her second journey clutching a bulging blanket, the flames had jumped the fire breaks and were racing across the tinder-dry grass towards the farm. She heard those passing buckets utter a groan of disappointment, but they kept on working.

Within minutes one of the outbuildings had caught fire. Liza paused to stare at it with tears in her eyes, then followed Ilse determinedly back into the house.

When Fergal and Seth moved towards the blazing building, Benedict yelled, "Leave it to burn! Brendan, go with your father and see what you can rescue from the workshop. But be careful!" There was glue inside, which would fuel the fire, and piles of sawn wood were set out nearby to season. He didn't feel optimistic about their chances of saving much of that if this wind kept blowing so strongly, but perhaps some of the finished pieces of furniture and tools might be carried to safety.

They held the fire at bay for over an hour, breaking line at Benedict's orders to beat out smaller fires in the straw-like grass of summer. Fergal and his son managed to carry out the finished furniture and expensive tools from the workshop, stacking them on the little spit of land where the children were installed with a jumble of possessions. Even there they had a job and were doing it, keeping watch with buckets of water standing ready to tip over anything which caught light from the sparks whirling everywhere.

By now smoke had turned the sunny day into a false twilight and people were choking and coughing as they toiled frantically.

When the far end of the workshop suddenly burst into flames, Benedict groaned aloud and Liza sobbed. She knew how hard he had worked to develop the small furniture making business so that they would not be totally at the mercy of the weather and the farm yield.

The whole workshop was soon burning fiercely, adding black and acrid smoke to the grey woodsmoke. Cathie ripped up a sheet, soaking the pieces in the lake and bringing them to people to tie across their mouths, for hot air burned harshly in the throat. Faces lost their identity as they became smoke-blackened and there were just the buckets, heavy with water, tugging at your shoulders one after another.

As the fire approached the homestead itself, Liza went to join the line of those passing buckets. She found herself working side by side with her daughter and marvelled at Cathie's strength, for her own arms were aching and heavy. When she dropped a whole bucketful, she moved out of the line, panting, knowing she had to take a break for a moment or two.

Dinny and Fergal's house was closer to the fire. It seemed to catch light all of a sudden and be engulfed in flames within minutes. Liza saw Dinny stand still for a moment, rigid with pain, then move back into line with her lips pressed tightly together. Her heart ached for her friend, ached for them all.

Before she could move into the bucket line again, Benedict came and tugged her arm, saying hoarsely, "It's no use, love. Our house has caught fire at the other side. We'll move out what bigger furniture we can from this end, then we must retreat to the lake and leave it to burn."

Liza stared at him blankly for a moment before the meaning of his words sank in. She saw the anguish in his eyes and knew it was mirrored in her own, then he turned to Cathie

and said, "Take your mother to safety, love! She's exhausted." Even before he had finished speaking, he had turned to check that everyone else was all right, counting heads with a sooty finger, then leading the way towards the house.

Liza shook her head at her daughter, who was pulling her towards the water, and drove back the tears and momentary weakness with anger. "I'm all right. I'm going to help carry things out." She moved towards the house before anyone could try to stop her.

People staggered past, carrying whatever came to hand from the smoke-filled interior, dumping their burdens near the water and then running back inside.

But after only a few journeys, the heat from the blazing end of the house was so intense, and the smoke inside so thick that Benedict shouted to them to stop and take refuge near the water. He counted heads again and nodded in relief to find all accounted for. Neither he nor Liza would ever forget that her first husband had been killed by a falling beam in another house fire.

Liza wept openly as she stood there watching everything they had worked so hard for being devoured by the flames, which seemed to shoot through the blackness of the smoke as if to mock the watchers with their searing power. As Cathie put an arm round her, Liza noticed paler stripes down her daughter's smoke-blackened face and it took her a moment to realise they were tears. She felt exhausted now, so leaned on the strong young arm, standing in the middle of a silent group of people.

Moving like an old man, Benedict came to join them. He nodded to Cathie, "You've done well, lass." Then he bent his head to kiss Liza's dirty cheek, "I'll build you a new home, love. I promise."

She forced back the tears. "We'll build it together."

Then they could only hold on to each other and watch their home burn to the ground. Ilse stood beside Josie, shocked to the core by what had happened, for she too had lost many of her possessions.

By sheer chance the fire only went round the southern part of the lake, for to the north the cleared farm land interrupted its mad race till—too late to help the Caines—the sea breeze dropped. The swampy ground to the south had also slowed the flames' rampage down, but by then all the buildings that had made up Lizabrook Homestead were reduced to ashes.

Lucas was the only member of the family missing and they were worried he might have got caught by the fire on his way home from Mandurah. There was no way to tell, no way to move through the burnt land till the layers of ash had cooled down.

"Lucas is a sensible chap. He'll be all right," Benedict said, as much to reassure himself as Liza.

As night fell people slept on what they could, staying near the lake for safety. Benedict and Fergal took it in turns to keep watch, just in case a stray spark set the northern side of the lake afire.

The following morning Dinny and Brendan went to check the land which she and her son knew better than anyone. She might not have been born here, she might have Irish as well as aboriginal blood, but she had put strong roots down and considered this her place now—and was equally sure it had accepted her, as had the aboriginal tribe whose land it was.

They found that the main fire had burned out, though the ground was still hot in patches and the occasional tree trunk was still smouldering. Everyone at Lizabrook Homestead gathered to work out what to do and they were a solemn group, conscious of how very much they had lost. There was a grimness to Benedict's face that had not been there before.

Liza felt numb and disoriented. Once she looked at the governess and saw Ilse staring into the distance, tears welling in her eyes. "It's a harsh land," she said softly.

"I hadn't realised how quickly it could happen," Ilse admitted.

"How much did you manage to save?"

"Most of my clothes and my books. Also the photographs of my family."

"That's something, then."

Benedict announced, "We can start rebuilding almost immediately, if we can get some sawn timber from Mandurah. We'll make mud bricks this time for the walls. They don't burn as easily. The new house will have to be smaller at first, I'm afraid." He looked at the governess. "I hope you'll still stay with us, Ilse."

"Of course I will. And I'll help in any way I can as we rebuild."

So Liza had to hug her, then she and the governess set to work moving the pieces of furniture that had been saved to the shade of the few trees left standing in irregular groups near the water and covering the better pieces with what blankets and sacking remained.

"We'd just stocked up the provision shed with sacks of flour," Liza mourned as she worked with Dinny to take stock of the food that had been saved. "Now it's all wasted."

"Do you not have fire insurance?" Ilse asked.

Liza shook her head blindly. "No. They don't insure places like this. You just—look after yourselves." Then she went back to work.

Benedict's oldest son, Lucas, appeared mid-morning from the direction of Mandurah, followed a short time later by some of their neighbours from Brookley. Liza burst into tears of sheer relief that Lucas was still alive, for he was as dear to her as her own children.

Cathie who had been watching her mother and worrying about how strained she looked, made her sit down on one of the chairs they'd saved.

"I'm sorry," Liza gulped. "It's just—I'm having another child and I always get t-tearful—"

Benedict overheard her and came striding across to kneel beside her and cradle her in his arms. "What a way to tell us!" He turned to gaze at the blackened ruin of the home he had built with his own hands, adding quietly, "And anyway, who does not want to weep today?"

Fifty miles away in Perth, Christina Docherty paced up and down the veranda of the house they had rented, waiting for her husband to return from a meeting in town. Her sons started shouting at one another nearby and she stopped for a moment to frown in their direction, then shrugged and left the governess to settle the fight.

When she saw Dermott striding back up the street, she jumped off the veranda and rushed to greet him, careless of her dignity. "You've been gone for ages!" she complained, linking her arm in his. "Did that man turn up?"

"Yes." He grinned. "I'm sorry to tell you my sister's farm was burnt out by a bush fire."

"Good. Maybe now we can sort out our own lives. I'm fed up of living in this hovel." She had never understood his stupid obsession with getting revenge on his sister. To her mind, what had happened had been an accident and Niall Docherty was a lout who deserved all he got. She had only met him once, when he came to her mother's inn, but that had been enough to take his measure. Dermott had always followed his brother's lead. The two of them had come to Australia, hoping to get money out of their sister's rich husband, and Niall had been about to rape Dinny when Liza shot him, as far as Christina could make out. Serve him right. She'd shoot someone who tried to rape her, too. But of course she didn't say that to her husband, who still idolised his brother's memory.

Dermott put his arm round her. "Well, we'll be moving soon, though not back to England. I thought we'd spend some time at that farm I bought cheaply in Melbourne. It's closer than

I'd realised to my dear sister's homestead." He frowned. What if he'd burned his own property along with hers?

She looked at him in horror. "Dermott Docherty, have you run mad? I thought you were just going to sell that place! You don't know the first thing about farming and I certainly don't want to live in the country, least of all here in Western Australia. I married you to escape all that!" She had been horrified when her father forced the Pringle family to emigrate to Australia. Her mother had made the best of it, but then Dorothy Pringle had always made the best of things throughout her unhappy marriage. Christina despised her for that. As for her father, he had lost all their money with his stupid schemes. No wonder she'd run away with Dermott.

"Well, I hadn't realised it was just down the road from Lizabrook. I swore when Niall died that I'd make my sister pay and—"

"She has paid! She's lost her home. Surely that's enough?" Even though Kitty had hated Liza, who had made all the eligible men fall for her, she didn't wish her any more ill than that.

He scowled at her. "Might be enough. Might not. Anyway it won't hurt for me an' Matthieu to live fairly quietly for a year or two, and I fancy trying the life of a country gentleman. I can always sell the place later."

She moved away from him, close to tears. When he set his mind on something he was bull-headed about it and she'd learned to fear his sudden whims. "We're living quietly enough here in Perth, Dermott. I can't believe how small this place still is and how backward compared to Melbourne. I don't call this a capital city! And the Australian countryside isn't like England."

"We'll do things my way, Christina!"

“Well, I don’t see why we have to stick with Matthieu Correntin. We don’t need him any more. We’ve enough money now to live like gentry in England.”

There was an edge of steel in his voice as Dermott answered, “A bit more never hurts. I want to be really rich when we eventually go back to England and Matthieu’s both clever and useful.” If Dermott had heeded his partner’s advice he’d never have had to leave Melbourne, something he regretted as much as his wife after spending a few weeks in a backwater like Perth—though he wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of telling her so.

Realising they were standing in the middle of the street arguing and that a neighbour was approaching, he muttered, “Say hello to Mrs Fenton. She may be short of money, but she’s still got some useful connections.”

Christina took a deep breath and turned to smile at their neighbour, who was taking the air dressed in her widow’s black. “And how are you today, Mrs Fenton?”

“I’m well, thank you.” Agnes started to move on.

Dermott said quickly, “Perhaps you’d like to join us for a cup of tea and hear our news, Mrs F? We’ve just bought ourselves a farm.”

“Another time, perhaps, Mr Docherty. It’s a year since my husband died and I’m off to town to buy something a little lighter than unrelieved black. In fact,” Agnes looked down and grimaced, “I don’t think I’m even going into half-mourning. I’ve had enough of dark colours.” With an inclination of her head, she walked briskly on.

As she passed a shop window, Agnes glanced at her own reflection with approval. She might be approaching fifty, but she had retained her figure and her health was still good.

Catching sight of a friend in the distance she hurried along the street, eager to chat. She was so bored with living alone! And with being a widow. What she needed was a man, both to support her and to share her bed. She had debated going back to England, but she did not fancy living on her son-in-law’s charity or even that of her son in Sydney. Besides,

she'd have more chance of finding another husband here in Australia than in England because women were still in short supply—though this time she'd be a bit more careful. Her late husband had been a spendthrift and latterly a drunkard as well.

But she needed to find someone before what was left of her money ran out.

In Lancashire Magnus Hamilton went to see the doctor after tea on the Friday evening to talk about his mother, whose behaviour was growing increasingly strange and who had recently taken to wandering the house at night, disturbing everyone's sleep.

Clifford Barnes, an earnest man in his late forties with a reputation for caring about all his patients whether they were rich or poor, showed Magnus into his consulting room, looked at the younger man sympathetically and gestured to him to sit down. He eased himself into his big comfortable chair behind the ornate mahogany desk, hesitated for a moment then said what he had to say bluntly because he knew of no way to soften this type of bad news, "I'm afraid your mother is suffering from softening of the brain, which has led to a degeneration of the mental faculties. It—um, happens to some older folk." He sighed and added, "Regrettably, there is nothing medical science can do to help."

Magnus stared down at the dark red carpet with its pattern of squares and lozenges, struggling to come to terms with this, his thoughts fragmenting and twisting away from the dreadful news. He had often wished he could afford a carpet as soft as this for his mother's swollen, aching feet to tread on. He had wished to do all sorts of things for her, because Janey Hamilton had been a good mother to them all, but although he earned an adequate living as foreman in the workshop of Ludlam's cotton mill, he had little put by. Since his father's death when he was eighteen years old, he had had to support his three brothers, sister and mother, so there had never been enough coming in for luxuries like fancy carpets.

He was foolish to indulge in dreams! You'd think he'd have grown out of that by now. He'd grown out of just about everything else—his own plans for finding a wife and having children, his desire to better himself, his love of learning. He had enough on his plate just surviving at the moment.

He looked down at his long legs, remembering the way he had grown out of his clothes so quickly in the years of his youth, until he reached his present height of six feet four inches. That had given them an extra expense, for it cost more to find clothing that would cover his tall, spare frame decently. You couldn't buy things from the second-hand clothes shop, but had to have them made specially. His mother had gone without new clothes for years in order that he be decently clad for work. He'd known that and been unable to do anything about it, for it was his wages that kept them all.

When Dr Barnes cleared his throat, Magnus realised he'd been lost in his thoughts and squared his shoulders to ask, "What's going to happen to her, then? I mean—what can we expect?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you that she'll grow more and more vague and will gradually lose the ability to care for herself. She'll have to be looked after like a helpless baby in the end. And that may happen quite quickly or slowly. One can never predict."

"Oh, God!" For a few moments, Magnus buried his face in his hands and fought against his emotions.

"I can arrange for her to be taken into the Benevolent Home. They treat the poor creatures in their care pretty decently, I promise you, not like the old days. We're more enlightened about such things nowadays." And the Ben was no longer dependent on the Ludlam family's grudging charity. The days of men, even millowners, acting as if they owned a town and its inhabitants body and soul were past.

“I’d never put her in there!” Magnus didn’t even have to consider it. His mother hated the Ben and had always tried to avoid even walking past it. The poor inmates who were not violent sat outside in the sun on fine days, their faces usually blank, and there was always the sound of the ones who were really bad from inside, moaning and screaming, especially when the moon was full. He would not confine his mother to a place like that for her final days, however sad her mental state. “We’ll continue to care for her at home, thank you, doctor. We’ll manage somehow.”

Dr Barnes nodded. A decent fellow, Magnus Hamilton. Scottish originally, but the family had lived here in Pendleworth for many years. He always had a fancy that Magnus must have Viking blood in his ancestry, he was such a giant of a man, with that bright red-gold hair. A woman would make the most of such hair, but Magnus cropped it as short as was decent and shaved his face too, as if he didn’t want to be bothered with his appearance, though most men were wearing at least a moustache these days, if not a full beard. The doctor let silence hang between them for a few seconds longer, then said simply, “As you choose, Magnus. But the offer will always be open. People with your mother’s affliction can be very difficult to care for towards the end.”

Magnus walked slowly home feeling sick to his soul. He hadn’t needed a doctor to tell him something was dreadfully wrong. They’d been hiding his mother’s vagaries for a year or two now and his sister Mairi had had to give up her job at the Emporium to care for her, though she had loved serving the customers and seeing half the town pass through the big haberdashery and fabrics shop. It was Mairi who had insisted on calling in the doctor, saying she’d never forgive herself if they didn’t try everything they could.

When he got home Magnus could hardly bear to look at his mother, who was sitting rocking quietly in front of the fire while his sister set the table, her expression grim.

“She’s been bad again today,” Mairi said abruptly. Her mother had pulled the tablecloth off, though luckily there had not been much on it, and had then cast it aside to begin moving her hand backwards and forwards over the wood as if she were sandpapering it. When Mairi had tried to stop her, knowing that she would rub until her hand was raw, Janey had thrown a temper tantrum that had left them both exhausted. Sometimes Mairi felt she could not bear another day like this.

“Where’s Hamish?” Magnus did not want to tell his news twice.

“Out at the Working Men’s Institute.” Mairi hesitated, then added, “Someone’s giving a talk about Australia.”

The words burst out before he could stop them. “Not him as well!”

She shrugged. Not for her to fight her younger brother’s battles. If Hamish was determined to emigrate, nothing she said would make any difference. It hadn’t when their other brothers set their minds on Canada. “What did the doctor say about Mum?”

Hamish glanced towards the rocking figure. “I’ll tell you later.”

“She doesn’t understand what we’re talking about now, you know.”

“She does sometimes so I’d rather wait. I don’t want to upset her.”

“Then I’ll tell you my news instead.” Mairi took a deep breath. “Magnus, Elwyn Bebb at chapel has—well, he’s asked me to walk out with him.”

“And you want to?”

She nodded vigorously. “Aye. I do.”

“Then I’m glad for you.” But he could not prevent himself from feeling envious, though he tried not to show it. After all, Mairi was twenty-six, some might have said a confirmed spinster, and she was needed at home—desperately. If she married, how would he look after his mother? Well, time to worry about that when it happened. Mairi deserved some

happiness. It had been hard for her these past two years. “I am glad for you.” He went over and gave her a cracking great hug.

Afterwards she held him at arm’s length and studied his face. “Why don’t you find yourself a lassie, Magnus?”

He shook his head, his eyes going to his mother. “What have I to offer anyone now but hard work? It’s getting you down and she’s your mother. How could we ask a stranger to live like this?”

Mairi leaned against him for a moment. “You’re a wonderful brother, Magnus, and a caring son. You’d make a good father.” She glanced up, seeing that grim expression return to his face. He seemed to have forgotten how to smile lately. She could remember him a few years ago, before their mother had started to grow vague and forgetful. How lively he had been then, in spite of the hard work! Always the one to lead a sing-song with his clear baritone voice. Going down to the Institute to hear a lecture on anything and everything, so eager was he for knowledge. And now? Now he spent his time mainly at home in the evenings. Oh, he still borrowed books from the library and still tramped across the moors occasionally on fine Sundays, something that he had always loved doing, but he was a quieter, sadder man.

First their brother Athol, always the adventurous one, had left the country and gone across the sea to Canada, then his twin, Dougal, had followed him, unable to live without his brother, though the two of them had parted in anger.

With each departure Magnus had grown a little quieter. Now, Hamish was talking of Australia and she—she had fallen in love with a plump little man with a heart of gold, whose kindness shone out of his face, and she was hoping desperately that he loved her, too. Elwyn had asked her out walking, talked of going to the lantern show at church the following week, smiled at her warmly whenever they met and lingered to chat to her. Surely . . .

She shook away those thoughts. "I'll make you a cup of tea, shall I?" Raising her voice, she added more loudly, "Mother? Would you like a cup of tea as well?"

Once their mother would have jumped up and insisted on making it herself, now she just stared at them blankly as if she didn't understand the question. It was heartrending to see the changes in her.

Mairi looked at Magnus, her eyes brimming with tears and saw that his eyes were over-bright, too.