



# GOLDFIELDS

A GHOST STORY

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# GOLDFIELDS

## *A Ghost Story*

**AUSTRALIA, 1915**

They say our town was built on earth that shone with gold. Enormous chunks of the stuff that could buy you the life you dreamt of. Pick it up off the ground, you could. Or so they said.

By the time I was nineteen, anything that made the streets glitter was gone. We walked on earth the colour of rust. Wove through piles of horseshit and drunks sleeping off the night before. Dusty red footprints snaked through every building in town. But nothing glittered.

The gold was still there, but you had to look a lot harder to find it. Bury yourself deep in the earth. Spend days in darkness, hacking through rock. Turning away from things that go bump in the night.

The goldmine kept our little town alive. We lived in the constant rhythm of pick against rock, drenched in the smell of earth and surrounded by men whose skin was so constantly grimy it looked like velvet.

Most of the lads had shipped out now to fight, leaving the mines—and my father's hotel—populated by old men who suddenly began to behave like the boys they'd been hauled out of retirement to replace.

Being a barmaid at the Golden Plains Hotel—fine establishment and all that it was—was not the way I'd imagined spending my life. Like any girl my age, I dreamt of being swept off my feet by some handsome bully trap and whisked away to a life of luxury. The Golden Plains was a sea of dirty, wrinkled hands that sneaked drinks from my tray and pinches of whatever body part of mine happened to be closest to them. All those wrinkled hands, they knew whose daughter I was, but they also knew their publican's eyesight was so bad, they could grab at me til Christmas as long as Father was on the other side of the bar.

The bell above the door tinkled and Bill Campbell strode in like he owned the place. He winked and made a dive at the top button on my blouse. I slapped him away.

"Loosen up, eh Alice. Give a hard-working man a treat."

Bill had lost his son in the war earlier that year and ever since had been behaving like a prize drunken nob.

"You'll not say a word, Alice," Father had warned. "Let the man grieve in his own way. He ain't doing you no harm. Besides, he was into the malt whisky the other night. The man's keeping us in business."

"Beer!" Bill hollered.

I strode away, pretending not to hear.

Leaning against the bar was Charlie Marsh. At twenty-one, he was by far the youngest man in the place. He tossed overgrown fair hair from his eyes. "Dodgy Bill giving you a hard time again?"

I slammed my tray onto the bar. "Nice to see you standing up for me."

Charlie flashed a playful white smile and a dimple flecked his cheek. He put a hand on my shoulder. I felt a rush of heat through me, despite my anger.

"You want to keep things between you and me secret, don't you? Just doing as you asked."

I huffed. He was right, damn him. Just doing as I asked. My father would lose his head if he found out there was anything between that rogue Charlie Marsh and me. Still, a part of me craved a big gesture from Charlie. Some sign that I wasn't wasting my time. I saw a kind young man in him where the rest of the town—my father included—saw him as someone you wouldn't trust if your life depended on it. Sometimes, I felt my faith in him wavering. Nights like tonight, for example, when Charlie watched from the bar while Dodgy Bill Campbell had a lunge at my goods.

Just once, Charlie. Be a hero. Knock that scab's teeth out.

But he tossed back another beer and I knew the only teeth he'd have a chance of knocking out tonight would be his own as he stumbled down the pub's front stairs.

When I looked up, Ivy was watching us from the corner of the bar. Cold eyes fixed on Charlie, staring like she wanted him to go up in flames.

I walked over to her. The corner was icy, despite the heaving mass of bodies and the cloying smoke-filled air. Ivy brought the coldness with her.

"What d'you want?" I murmured. "Why are you here?"

As always, she said nothing. Just kept staring at Charlie with her huge, chilling eyes.

"I like him," I said. "And he likes me. I don't want you causing no trouble, you understand?"

Ivy pulled her gaze from Charlie and turned to me. I knew she could hear me. Father glanced over and motioned to me to get behind the bar. He looked right through Ivy. They all did; all those muddy-faced miners. It was only me that could see her.

Tragic, dead Ivy.

Sometimes I wished I wasn't so lucky. Wished I experienced her the way the rest of the world did: as a cold draught or a banging door you'd been gosh darn meaning to get fixed for months now. But to me she wasn't just a flash of light in the corner of my eye. She was young woman in a frayed yellow bustle dress with eyes like storm clouds. A reminder that there were layers between life and death that stretched far beyond our comprehension.

\*

It was after three in the morning when Father tipped the last of the drunkards into the street and heaved the front door closed. I stumbled up to my bedroom, stinking of beer and tobacco. Squinting in the darkness, I turned the knob on my temperamental gas lamp. Nothing happened. Sighing, I lit a candle and sat it on the nightstand. I flung my blouse and skirt onto the floor and hunched over the washstand in my chemise. Splashed my face and shoulders. I closed my eyes and let the cool water roll down my skin.

A sudden hand on my arm and I swallowed a shriek.

"Christ Almighty!" I grabbed my skirt from the floor and held it over my flimsy underwear. "How the hell d'you get in here?"

Charlie grinned, too dimply and dashing for me to be angry. His eyes twinkled. "Been waiting up here since midnight."

I smiled crookedly. "And here I thought you'd just forgotten to say goodbye."

He kissed my lips. "Never." He tasted of beer and camp pie. Warm and comforting. He tried to ease away the dress I had pressed against my chest. I slapped his hand away. "All right, all right." He gave up and sat on the end of my bed. Patted the space beside him. "Come here, my princess. Gotta talk to you."

I perched at his side. He took my hand.

"The train comes through on Friday afternoon. Down to Port Augusta."

I nodded. Since the railway had opened a month ago, it was all anyone could talk about. It was a lifeline, connecting us to the rest of the country. A long-overdue artery pumping lifeblood into our fading town.

"I want to be on that train," said Charlie. "And my lovely Alice, I want you to be on it with me."

Everyone in town had walked the half-mile to the station to watch the first train come through. I'd dreamt of being on it; watching our town become a speck on the shimmering horizon. Watching buildings sprout up and trams clatter by. Sharing the journey with people who dreamt of more than their nightly beer.

Afterwards, I'd found myself going out there every Friday afternoon. Watching that trail of smoke grow nearer. Holding my breath as the great beast of the train approached. I liked to walk out into the desert and stand near the edge of the tracks. Hear the rumble push through the stillness. Feel the air shift as the train flew by. It set my imagination churning. But for all, that I couldn't picture myself actually leaving this place.

Charlie squeezed my hand. My stomach was turning over with a feeling I wasn't sure whether was pleasant or not.

"What do you say?"

"I..." My mouth opened and closed like a fish. "You want to leave? Why? I thought you said this was the place to be."

The town had come down hard on Charlie when he'd chosen not to fight.

*Coward*, they said. *No sense of honour. Just like his criminal father.*

Charlie had brushed it away. "Why would I want to go get my head blown off when I can stay here and dig up gold? This is the place to be. Riches coming out of the ground."

The riches weren't his, of course. The mine belonged to the government who paid him a pittance to spend hours in sweltering darkness.

"I've had enough of working for them toffs," he told me. His voice thickened. "And to be honest, Alice, I've had enough of being criticised for not signing up."

Secretly, I'd been relieved he hadn't gone. Couldn't bear the thought of losing him, sense of honour or no. That relief had only intensified as more and more stories of loss and suffering filtered back over the seas.

I told him this now.

He smiled. Kissed the edge of my lips and brushed a strand of limp brown hair off my face. "I've come into some money," he said.

I frowned. "How?"

"It's not important. But it's enough to get us both out of here and set ourselves up somewhere decent. Adelaide maybe."

I gave him a short smile, then pulled away. He tugged me back towards him.

"Come on, Alice. You've always talked about leaving. Getting out of this place and seeing the world. Was that just talk?"

I sighed. "I don't know." I felt a twist of disgust at myself. *Coward*. "I've got Father to think about. How's he going to run this place without me? How's he going to run his life without me? He can't even boil a bloody egg on his own."

"You told me you felt trapped," said Charlie. "Said you felt your father was locking you up here. Told me you dreamt of getting out."

I nodded. I'd said all those things, and meant them. This hot, lonely life drove me mad with boredom, and the bar sickened me. I hated the men with their sneaky hands and snide comments. Hated crawling into bed each night stinking like a swill bucket.

"I'll think about it," I told Charlie, half a smile on my lips.

I shivered suddenly. Watched the candle flame spiral upwards.

Ivy.

The window began to tremble. Charlie looked up in alarm. "What the hell?"

"It's just the wind," I said. "Just wind." I glanced around the room. Where was she? I could see nothing but the menacing shadows painted by the dancing candle. The window kept thrashing against its frame.

"You got to go," I told Charlie. "I'll unlock the door for you. Quiet now, so Father don't hear." Father would be more likely to be woken by the thumping of the window, of course, than by light-footed Charlie. I hurried him from my room and out through the dark bar. He stumbled onto the deserted Main Street and stared up at my bedroom window with wide eyes. I forced my best nothing-at-all-strange-going-on-here smile.

"I'll think about it," I said again, over Ivy's thudding. "I'll have an answer for you real soon."

But Charlie's face was pale and drawn. I could tell he'd forgotten all about the train.

\*

I stormed back up to my bedroom. "Show yourself," I hissed. "Stop your hiding." But the room was back to its cloying humidity, the candle puffing away peacefully and the window still. "You're a bloody coward," I said. "You hear me?"

Ivy had first appeared when I was eight. My father and I had just moved to town and we'd bought the hotel for a pittance. A murder, they said. Working girl's throat cut by a customer in one of the bedrooms upstairs. Business going cheap, because who likes to work amongst spilt blood?

Don't tell me, said my father, place is haunted, ha ha. Did you ever hear such claptrap, Alice? He signed on the dotted line and the place was ours.

The second floor of the Golden Plains contained a long, creaky corridor with four rooms on either side. Back when the streets glittered, the rooms were full of men who'd come to town with pans and picks, desperate to make their fortune. But by the time Father and I moved in, the only gold seekers were the miners who lived in a row of spidery bothies close to the mine. No one else ever came to stay. I don't



think anyone even knew how to find us, stranded as we were in the middle of the country, with one road in and out. And so Father and I had that second floor to ourselves.

"Choose a bedroom," he told me. And though the room opposite his had enormous double windows that looked out over a salt lake, I was drawn to the tiny hovel in the back corner.

"Are you sure?" Father said.

"Yes." Had no thought of why.

I didn't see her right away. But I lay in bed that first night and felt that chill, that sadness she pressed upon the air. I felt an intense loneliness; something I was more than familiar with. I'd grown up on the goldfields of Kalgoorlie, learning my letters in our hut with my mother, while Father was off seeking our fortune. There were few children my age in the camp, and I spent my time reading, preferring the fantasy worlds of my books to my bug-infested reality. After Mother's death, I followed Father and his overflowing pockets to the Golden Plains, without ever having had a real friend.

Ivy's sadness made me weep. I didn't know what I was crying for. Didn't know yet that the sadness I was feeling wasn't mine.

For the first weeks, she made her presence known only by the curling candle trick. Hovering in the middle of a vast red desert, the hotel had no electricity, of course. Our gas supply was questionable at best—something I later attributed to Ivy and her fascination with things that burned—so, many of our nights were spent in candlelight. I was sitting on my bed, reading, when the flame morphed into a long, thin shard that rose towards the ceiling. It moved the left, curled to the right. I leapt up to call Father—he had to see this—but something stopped me. A realisation that I best keep this to myself. And a realisation that maybe the stories they all told about this place were true. Maybe I wasn't alone in that little room.

I wasn't afraid. I knew the presence belonged to a young woman. Had heard the story from well-meaning locals. Ivy Westerly, they'd said, stopping Father and I on the street one day. Killed aged nineteen, throat cut back in ninety-two. Then Father had butted in, all we don't need to hear none of this do we Alice, and I'd never got to hear the rest.

"Hello Ivy Westerly," I said to the dancing candle. "My name is Alice Barnes."

One morning, I looked into the mirror and there she was behind me. My heart bounded into my throat. Gooseflesh flooded my arms. Ivy was tiny for her age; only a little taller than eight-year-old me. The bustle dress was too big for her. It hung crooked on her shoulders and pooled at her feet. Her red hair was piled messily

onto her head; pieces falling over a narrow face. Her eyes were wide. Full of sadness. Loneliness. I wanted to hold her and tell her everything would be all right.

Though I wouldn't catch up to Ivy's nineteen for another eleven years, I felt a kindred spirit in her. Alive or dead.

*You don't have to be lonely anymore, Ivy. I'm here.*

Over the years, she floated in and out of my vision, sometimes at night, other times bright summer mornings. I saw her in my bedroom, at the dinner table, staring at me as I was about to step into the bath. Once she appeared in the middle of the crowded bar and I was so damn busy I charged right through the middle of her.

We learnt to speak to each other with a locket I hung over my fingers. Ivy would make the chain swing. Back and forth for yes. Circles for no.

Sometimes our conversations were silly.

*Do you think Dodgy Bill's beard looks like a dead cat strapped to his face? (Yes.)*

Sometimes more serious.

*Have you ever been in love, Ivy? (No.)*

Crazy though I knew it was, Ivy was my friend. The first real friend I had ever had.

She'd been around more often since things started up between Charlie and me. Ivy never spoke, but she didn't need to. She hated Charlie. The incident with the windows tonight hadn't been the first. There'd been door slamming, broken glasses. I'd ignored it. Put it down to petty jealousy. But tonight, I'd had enough.

"He never did a thing to you," I told my dark bedroom. "Why you got to keep scaring him like that?"

As soon as I spoke, I saw it. Charlie was my way out. Something Ivy didn't have. Her killer had condemned her to a waking death; condemned her to haunt this godforsaken hotel forever. Ivy had had her life stolen from her. Mine lay out ahead of me. We were both nineteen now, but Ivy would stay that way forever.

*I'm sorry, Ivy, I thought, but I'm not going to be imprisoned here like you.*

I closed my eyes. Tomorrow I'd tell Charlie I'd be on that train.

\*

Charlie, like most of the other men in town, worked in the goldmine a mile from the main road. They started work early, despite their late nights at our hotel. I knew by ten I'd find him outside the general store with a cigarette in one hand and a sandwich in the other.

He didn't disappoint me. He was leaning casually against the side of the building, blowing threads of smoke into the unbroken blue sky.

He smiled when he saw me, his whole face lifting. I felt a surge of love for him.

My Charlie. My way out.

He dropped his cigarette and ground it into the dust with the heel of his boot. "You got good news for me, Al?" His eyes were bleary and red. I wondered if they were the remnants of last night's drinking session, or if Ivy's rattling windows had haunted his dreams.

I took his grimy hands. "This Friday, then."

He grinned and grabbed me in a bear hug, swinging me off the ground. He smelled of sweat and earth. "This Friday. Two days." He pinched my backside. "You best get packing, little lady."

I swatted a fly away from my face. "You'll take care of the tickets?" My cheeks reddened. "I've not got enough money to... Well... I'm sorry..."

He waved away my embarrassment. "It's taken care of, Alice. I told you. I come into some cash."

"Right." I eyed him cautiously. "About that. How exactly?"

*Just like his criminal father,* they all said.

Charlie's father had been hanged when his son was just a boy. Charlie never spoke of it and nor did the townspeople, beyond their snide whispers and narrowed eyes. I didn't know what his father's crimes were. Didn't want to know. I told myself it wasn't important. No matter what everyone said, I knew Charlie was nothing like his father. But now, curse on me, I found myself wondering if maybe there was a little truth in the whispers.

*Just like his criminal father.*

I hated myself for thinking it. But I knew there was a good chance Charlie had come into that cash with light fingers.

I pressed a hand to his stubbly cheek. "It's all right. Don't tell me." Best to live in ignorance, I thought. "As long as it gets us out of here, I don't care where it came from."

Charlie grinned and pinched a hurried kiss. "Train leaves at five past three on Friday afternoon. Meet me at the station." He winked. "Don't be late."

I hurried back to the hotel before Father discovered me gone. I washed our breakfast dishes and began to prepare for the evening shift. Ivy had been busy. Every glass on the shelf had been upended. The old newspaper articles that Father had pinned to the noticeboard on the wall lay strewn across the floor. And all our

peppershakers had been emptied, leaving the tables covered in little black mountains. I sighed.

"Thank you, Ivy. Thank you very much."

But the air was still. She wasn't around.

I set to work scooping the spilled pepper from the tables. Let out a violent sneeze.

The steps above my head creaked as Father ambled down to the bar. He rubbed his grey beard and glanced at the articles on the floor. "What happened here then?"

I brushed my peppery hands. "I can't imagine."

Father had seen plenty of Ivy's handiwork over the years, yet it never seemed to occur to him that there might be anything untoward going on. "Pins gave out, maybe," he said.

I held back a laugh. "Maybe."

He wandered over and kissed my cheek. "Pick them up, will you, love? I'm off to the post office. See if my new taps have come in yet."

I refilled the peppershakers, then started on the papers. Stories on the building of the railway line, the opening of the Block Goldmine. And there, in the middle of the floor, *Murder at the Golden Plains Hotel*. I'd read the article before, of course. It had been pinned to our wall for years. The story brought in curious customers, Father said. The gullible sort that believe in ghosts, ha ha, right, Alice? But it had been a long time since I had revisited the story.

I picked up the page. There was a blurry photograph of Ivy, wearing the same bustle dress I'd come to know well. Another photograph beside her. A man. The face was oddly familiar. I read the caption below the picture. For a second, my breath left me. I folded up the article and slid it into the pocket of my skirt.

\*

Miners began to filter into the hotel about five o'clock. By six, the bar was filled with dusty beards, red footprints and armpits with a stink that could make your eyes water. Ivy was there too, hovering beneath the chandelier. Her eyes trailed me as I hurried around the bar, carrying drinks and clearing empty glasses.

"Come upstairs with me," I told her. I bunched my skirt into my fist and ran up to the gloomy corridors of our living quarters. The sun was disappearing, and dusky shadows lay over my bedroom. I glanced over my shoulder. Ivy was nowhere to be seen. Beneath my feet I could hear raucous laughter from the bar. I couldn't stay up here for long, but I needed to speak with her. I picked up the locket.

"Are you here?" The chain began to swing.

Yes.

I sat on my bed and pulled the newspaper article from my pocket.

"It was Charlie's father who killed you, wasn't it. Henry Marsh." I put down the chain. Didn't need her answer. "Charlie is not his father, Ivy. I know he's not perfect, but he's good to me. I don't need you to protect me." I sighed. "I can't stay here forever. I got to have a life of my own. Away from this dreadful bar." I felt a pang of guilt. Ivy couldn't just climb on a train and leave the hotel. She didn't lie in bed at night and dream of her new life. "You wouldn't wish me to be trapped too, would you?"

My eyes skimmed across the mirror and I caught a fleeting glimpse of her beside my bed. She vanished as quickly as she had appeared.

"Why you hiding?" And there she was. When Ivy appeared, she wasn't some ethereal, white, floating thing. She looked solid; as real as a person could look. I turned. She stood beside my bed, so close I could touch her, if there was anything of her to touch. I saw every detail of her: the faint freckles across her nose, the flyaway strands of red hair, the eyelets on her dress. We were the same age now, but Ivy seemed younger. Maybe it was the tragedy of her that made her look like a little girl.

I smiled crookedly. "Hello."

A glimmer of a smile on her face, or just a twitch of her lips? Hard to tell.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I wish I could help you. I wish I knew how to help you find peace."

She looked at me, head tilted.

"Is there anything I can do?"

Nothing from Ivy.

"You understand, don't you? Why I got to leave?"

She nodded.

"And you don't have to worry about Charlie. I swear. He's a good man, truly." I smiled to myself. "I'll miss you. I'll miss your tricks. Except for the one with the pepper. That one's a right pain." I laughed, but Ivy's eyes were full of sadness. I stared into them for a moment until her sorrow swept towards me and I had to turn away to keep from drowning.

I hurried back downstairs. I felt on edge. My talk with Ivy had been meant to clear things up, but the air felt charged and stormy.

When I arrived back in the bar, I saw Charlie had arrived. My mood lifted. I sidled past him and gave him a wink.

I began to load up my tray with dirty glasses. I thought of that train sliding out of town with me and Charlie on it. Buildings and trams. The town a speck on the horizon...

*He killed me in your bedroom,* said a sudden voice inside my head. I dropped my tray and the glasses shattered noisily.

Dodgy Bill whistled and clapped his hands above his head.

Father knelt beside me and helped me gather the shards of glass. He put a hand on my shoulder. "You all right?"

I nodded, though my hands were trembling. My heart was knocking against my ribs. She'd never spoken to me before. I'd never heard her voice. It was sharp and thin, with a hint of the Irish. A sound like threads of ice.

"S'all right," I told Father. "I can finish this. You go back and serve."

*He paid to spend the night with me.*

"Go away," I mumbled. "Get out of my head." I piled the broken glass onto the tray. A large piece shattered under Dodgy Bill's boots. He kicked the shards into the crowd.

*Told me about his son. Charlie.*

I carried the tray into the kitchen and emptied the glass into the bin.

*When he was done with me, he pulled out a knife and put it in my neck.*

Father patted my shoulder. "You all right, love? Look as though you've had a fright."

"Get your hand off me," I growled. The voice that came out was not mine. I clamped my hand over my mouth. Dizziness swept over me. I tried to gulp down the hot, smoky air. My lungs tightened.

Father pulled away and looked at me with surprised eyes. I tried to speak, tried to explain, but couldn't make a sound. And then I was walking away from Father, pushing through the crowd until I reached Charlie.

"I'm sorry," I heard myself say. "I'm not coming with you. I can't leave this place."

His face fell. "Alice, I... Is this about the money? You want to know where I got it?"

"I don't care where you got it. I'm not coming with you. I can't spend my life with a criminal's son."

Charlie stood abruptly and the stool beneath him toppled. "I'm sorry you feel that way." He elbowed his way towards the exit. I tried to grab his hand, but my arms hung uselessly by my side. Charlie charged out into the night. Struggling against Ivy's spell, I ran towards the door. I felt her trying to tug me back to the bar. My legs were heavy, like I was running through waist-deep mud. I reached the door and threw my weight against it. It refused to open. I pressed my palms against the wood, gripped with hatred, with fear. Things Ivy had never made me feel before.

*You don't hate me,* she said, her voice slithering inside my brain. *I'm your only friend.*

One of the miners pulled open the door from the outside. I stumbled into him. He chuckled and said:

"Evening, Alice," but I pushed past him and raced outside. I gulped down a mouthful of air, as Ivy's icy grip released itself from my body. I began to sob, messily, noisily. Grateful to hear myself making sounds from my own throat.

I pulled my skirt up above my knees and ran. I had to get away from the hotel. And I had to find Charlie.

I raced down the middle of Main Street. Deserted but for a single horse and rider plodding past the dark wooden shops. I hurried towards the bothies on the edge of town.

The huts were low and crooked, leaning against each other as though they needed the support to keep standing. A few were lit with muted yellow light. Most were dark and empty. Which was Charlie's?

I saw a figure lying on his back on the patchy grass, smoking and staring at the diamond-studded sky.

"Charlie!" I called. The night chill had fallen over the desert and my panting breath bloomed out in silver clouds. I doubled over, trying to suck down more air.

"Alice?" He stood up and tossed down his cigarette.

I flung my arms around his neck. "I'm so sorry," I sobbed. "I didn't mean any of those things I said. Of course I'm coming with you."

He held me at arm's length. "What the hell was that all about in there?"

"It was Ivy," I coughed, shivering in my thin blouse. "The girl your father killed. In our hotel. She was the one rattling the windows. And the one that made me drop all the glasses. She made me say those dreadful things." I tried to choke down my hysterical tears. "I know how this must sound."

Charlie let his hands fall from my shoulders. "Yeah. It sounds bloody crazy."

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. "You saw the windows rattling. It scared you. I know it did. How else do you explain that?"

"You're saying the hotel is haunted. By the girl my father murdered." He started to laugh humourlessly. "Okay then."

"You got to believe me, Charlie, please. I never would have said those things to you." I gulped down my breath. "And you got to let me stay with you tonight. I can't go back to the hotel."

He pulled me into his body and stroked my hair. "Of course you can stay with me." He pulled off his jacket and slipped it over my shoulders. He wrapped his arm around my waist and began to walk me towards his hut. Beyond the row of bothies, inky blackness swallowed the desert. Above us: a glittering sky, awash with

whirlpools of blue and purple. I huddled close to Charlie, suddenly terrified by the vastness of the place. Terrified of my own insignificance.

Charlie led me inside his hut and lit the lamp. A crooked table and mattress were crowded around a narrow hearth. Boots were tipped over by the door, clothes hung over a chair. A washstand stood in one corner, a tiny gas stove in the other.

Charlie poured two glasses of whisky from a bottle on the table.

"Here. This'll do you good."

I emptied my glass in one gulp. Felt my insides warm as the alcohol slid down my throat. Charlie nodded at the narrow bed.

"This is all there is, I'm afraid. We'll have to share."

I nodded. I didn't care about decency. Didn't care if we were caught. I just wanted to feel safe. Every muscle in my body was tense. I'd never seen Ivy outside the hotel, but after tonight, who knew what she was capable of? I unlaced my boots and wriggled onto the bed in my skirt and blouse. I tugged the thin woollen blanket up to my chin. Charlie reached for the lamp.

"No," I said hurriedly. "Leave it on. Please."

He nodded, then lay beside me. He wrapped an arm around my middle and kissed the side of my head.

"He didn't do it, you know," he said.

"What?"

"My da. He never killed no one. That girl, Ivy Westerly, she killed herself while she was in Da's room."

I sat up. "What?"

"She cut her own throat. She wanted to die. He tried to stop her. His fingerprints ended up on the knife and the jury saw what they wanted to see."

I hugged my knees. The gas lamp hissed steadily. A mosquito hummed above our heads. "Did you know?" I asked finally. "That it happened in our hotel?"

Charlie nodded. "Maybe I ought to have said. But I didn't think it mattered no more. I just wanted it to be forgotten."

I felt my tears creeping back. Tears for a boy who had watched his innocent father led to the scaffold. Tears over my own fear. And tears for a girl whose life had felt so hopeless she had seen no choice but to end it.

"I'm sorry about your father. I'm sorry no one knows the truth."

Charlie smiled faintly. "You know. That's all I care about."

He lay back on the mattress and I shuffled down beside him. Pressed myself against his chest.

I lay awake staring into the muted yellow light. Ivy's voice circled through my head.



*He killed me in your bedroom.*

Charlie and Ivy both wanted me to see the truth.

But one of them was lying.

\*

I slept in short, agitated bursts. Woke to a carol of birdsong and bright light streaming through the bare windows. I felt achy and exhausted. Rubbed my eyes and tried to breathe deeply. Friday. This time tomorrow, Ivy and the Golden Plains Hotel would be a memory.

Charlie sat up, his face foggy with sleep. He rubbed his eyes and smiled at me, his cheek creased from the pillow.

"You ought to be at the mine," I said.

"I'm done with that place. We're leaving tonight. What does it matter if I show up today or not? Besides." He reached for my hand. "I'm worried about you. Don't want to leave you alone now, do I?" He kissed my fingers.

"Father will be worried sick," I said "I got to go see him."

"Alice, you ain't going back to that place. Not after all the things you said happened last night."

I sucked in my breath. The thought of returning to Ivy terrified me. But I knew how concerned Father would be. "I got to go back and tell Father I'm all right."

"Tell him you're all right? And then disappear again on the three o'clock train?"

I saw the foolishness in it, of course. But I couldn't bear to think of father fretting for me, sleepless with worry.

"Besides," I said. "I don't have my things. I need clean clothes, money. I don't even have a coat."

"You can borrow my coat," said Charlie. "And you'll get new clothes. There's plenty of money." He rubbed my shoulder. "Stay here today. Help me finish packing. And then once we're safely on our way, you can write to your father. I don't want you going back to the hotel."

Something passed over his eyes and I knew he believed me about Ivy. I saw the same fear in his face that I had the night of the rattling windows. The fear of a man whose beliefs had been upturned.

"I'll stay," I said. "But I got to leave that letter this afternoon, before we catch the train. I need Father to know that I'm safe. I'll run in and pin it to the noticeboard. I'll not be in the hotel for more than a minute."

I stood across the street from the Golden Plains, staring up at its lacy awnings and peeling brown weatherboards. I squeezed the letter in my fist.

*Dearest Father, I had scribbled, I'm sorry for leaving like this, but I hope you'll understand this is something I need to do. I can't stay here forever. Please don't worry. Charlie is with me and he takes real good care of me. I'll write soon. Love, Alice.*

My chest tightened and tears welled behind my eyes. I blinked them away.

I crossed the street and peered through the window. Father would be going mad with worry. I couldn't see him inside the bar. Was he out looking for me? He'd not been to Charlie's bothy. Never suspected a thing between us. My stomach twisted with guilt.

I drew in my breath. The noticeboard was right by the door. Ten seconds, I could be in and out. Never need to see the place again.

I charged deliberately up the front steps and into the bar. Stillness. As though Ivy had exhausted herself the night before. A fly tapped loudly against the window. I pinned the letter to the board. Stopped suddenly as a loud cry of distress echoed down the staircase. A man in pain.

My heart sped. "Father?" I rushed upstairs, stumbling on my skirt hem. I charged into his bedroom. Empty. The bathroom, empty. Sitting room, empty. I threw open the doors to all the unused guestrooms. Dust and creaks and spiders. Peeling walls and rotting floorboards.

No Father.

Finally, I pushed open the door to my little bedroom. Peered inside. The door slammed behind me, hitting me hard in the shoulder. I rattled the handle. I was trapped. But I wasn't alone.

I felt her before I turned around. Was that her breath on my neck? How could it be? And yet somehow it was.

I turned slowly. She looked the same as always: brow slightly furrowed, lips parted. But there was a menace in her eyes I'd not seen before.

I snatched the locket from my nightstand and held it close to her pale cheeks.

"Charlie's father didn't kill you, did he."

The chain hung limply from my fingers.

"Speak to me," I hissed. "You killed yourself, didn't you. You lied to me."

Yes. Her words inside my head. I threw down the locket.

"Why did you do it?"

*Because I couldn't bear it any longer. The hotel. The men. The hopelessness. It was my only way out.* She stepped closer to me. Her grey eyes shone with tears. *But this place, it doesn't let you go.*

I saw it then. She'd not been protecting me from Charlie. This had never been about protection. She was punishing me for leaving. For doing what she never could.

I stumbled backwards, my body pulsing with anger and fear. I heaved at the window. Like the door, it was tightly jammed.

"Help me!" I pounded my fist into the glass. Made the same eerie rattle that Ivy had. From my top-storey window, I could see the red plains beyond the town stretching into a silver mirage. People wove down Main Street; in and out of the post office, the bank. Horses were tied up outside the market, droopy in the afternoon heat. And there, behind the criss-cross of streets was the rail line, snaking through the desert like a row of stitching. Somewhere beyond the horizon, the 3:05 to Port Augusta was charging along that track towards us.

A thick heat haze hung over the town. I squinted. No, not heat haze. An eerie gold mist that blurred the sharpness and distorted colours. I blinked hard. Gripped the windowsill, dizzy with fear.

"What are you doing?" I mumbled. "Ivy?"

And then I saw him; Father, striding down Main Street and pulling open the door of the hotel. I let out another scream for help. Charged past Ivy and pounded on the door. I could hear my fists thudding against the wood. Why wasn't the sound travelling downstairs to Father?

I dared to glimpse at Ivy. She was peering out the window with a hint of a smile on her face. I raced across the room and stood beside her. Father was marching back down the hazy street, my letter clutched to his chest. He broke into a run. I knew he was headed for the station. Tears spilled down my cheeks. I wiped them away furiously. Perhaps Father would find Charlie, and Charlie would know something was wrong. They'd come looking for me. Father would learn of our relationship, but he'd forgive me. He'd understand. We'd catch the next train, I told myself desperately. Perhaps it was better this way.

"You are right," said Ivy. "It's better this way."

I turned in surprise. Her lips moving. Her voice in my ears instead of my head. She was inches from me. Smiling. I'd never seen her look this way. Her face alight, her eyes carrying optimism. She looked young and beautiful.

The candle on my nightstand flickered to life.

"What are you doing?"

The flame rose, spiralled upwards into a thin stream of fire, pale in the bright afternoon. With a sudden hiss, the gas lamp on the wall burst to life.

"Stop it, Ivy. Please." My mouth was dry, despite my tears. My breath came in short, terrified bursts.

The flame leapt out the top of the lamp and snatched the curtains. I stumbled away from the window, heat radiating against my face. I rattled the door. Smoke began to thicken and curl. Fire rippled onto the ceiling. Ivy stood amongst the flames, that childish smile lighting her face.

I crawled across the floor towards the window. The eerie gold fog had thickened. People were staring up at the burning hotel, their faces blurred. Couldn't they see me, there on the top storey, struggling, choking amongst the flames? They were shouting, shouting, *where is Mr Barnes?*

But I knew Mr Barnes wasn't coming. He was striding through the afternoon heat with his daughter's farewell note in his hand. Hurrying towards the station to stop her leaving town with a criminal's son.

I felt Ivy's hand around my arm, solid and real. She tugged me away from the window and wrapped her arms around me as I hunched breathlessly on the floor. My lungs clamped and I felt the gold give way to darkness. I managed a final glimpse through the window. Saw a column of smoke against the sky as the 3:05 rolled into the station.

\*

Ivy and me, we watched Father close down what was left of the hotel. Watched him heave closed that door with tearful red eyes.

We watched the mines close. Watched the people leave and clumps of spinifex sprout up along Main Street.

Now the Golden Plains Hotel is a wrecked ship, surrounded by the skeletal buildings that once made up our town. Now, trains roar by without columns of smoke and do not think to stop at our crumbling, abandoned station. Now, Ivy talks and I hear her. I brush by her arm and feel her. It's the rest of the world that's become dreamlike. Fluid and malleable. I can rattle windows with my will, make a candle flame curl with my thoughts. Of course, there are no candles now. When night falls, the hotel, like the rest of our town, is silent. Only the shadows of memories remain. When night comes, the dark is thick. Impenetrable.

But I can still see Ivy. We have no need for candlelight.

"You'll never be lonely again," she says. "I'm here."

**THE END**

## BONUS: SAMPLE CHAPTERS of

# PLAYING THE GHOST

## CHAPTER ONE

**Australia, 1857**

An accident, they say. Some poor fool trying to blast his way to glory by digging with black powder instead of a shovel. But we can all hear the whispers beneath. Those whispers that poor old Fred Buckley did this to himself. Tossed the explosives into his mining claim and leapt in there after them. Another failed attempt at fortune on the goldfields.

And now here we all are in the graveyard, gathered around the small wooden box containing all that's left of the man. I haven't seen inside myself, of course, but word is it contains a few brass buttons and a boot that was miraculously blown clear of the explosion.

I only met Buckley once or twice, but my husband Tom knew him well, their claims not far from each other's on the western edge of the Forest Creek gold diggings. The morning of Buckley's death, Tom said, he was heading out to start work when the explosion ripped through the air and made the ground move like sea.

The vicar murmurs a prayer, and down that sorry little box goes into the ground. Buckley had no wife or children, so there are no tears at his grave, just curiosity, and a fairly ceaseless torrent of murmuring.

We traipse back down the hill after the burial, clouds of dust blooming beneath our boots.

"Well," says Leo Evans, "if you're going to do away with yourself, that's a damn spectacular way to do it."

"Aye," Ollie Cooper agrees. "Something with a bit of drama to it."

“Let’s go to Martha’s,” says a leather-faced digger who’s just introduced himself to us as Clyde. “Was poor old Fred’s favourite place for a drink.”

Martha’s is a canvas-walled grog shop on the edge of the diggings, a remnant of the days when this place was nothing but a few holes in the ground, and outlawed drink was sold in the shadows. These days, the town’s made of more solid stuff than canvas, but Martha’s hasn’t lost its pull over the locals.

“Lucy?” Tom asks me. “Do you want to go home?”

“No.” I can’t bear the thought of another stilted night in our cottage, where Tom and I make strained small talk before falling asleep with our backs to each other. “You knew Mr Buckley well. We ought to drink to him.”

We pile into the carts and traps waiting outside the cemetery and rattle back towards Forest Creek. The sun is lying low over the hills, bathing the scarred landscape in shadow. Trees have been cut away in the scramble for gold, and the earth is a bleak forest of windlasses and tents. The evening shriek of birdsong is beginning in the sparse bushland that remains beyond the diggings. A silhouette of parrots swoops past the wagon.

Tom offers me a hand to help me out of the cart. I haven’t been to the tent village on the edge of the diggings since we moved into town a few months ago. But one glance at the place, one inhalation of that earth-and-ash scent brings back memory after memory: cooking bread in coals out the front of our tent, walls flapping like sails in the night. The constant rattle of mining cradles, of shovels, of footsteps, of men. Knuckles and fingernails thick with dirt. And the flies, the flies, the flies.

When Tom hands me a tin cup filled with Martha’s most vicious moonshine, I gulp it down quickly. I don’t want these memories lingering.

The grog shop tent is crowded and noisy, pipe smoke rising into the pitched roof and making the hot air near unbreathable. Men spill into the street, a few patched-skirted women among them. Most of the diggers who didn’t attend the

burial have finished work for the evening, and the crowd is growing. Conversation turns to who found takings today, before circling back to Fred Buckley.

“It was no suicide,” announces Arthur Wallace, who always knows everything about everything. “I heard he just sold five pounds’ worth.” He brings a fat cigar to his lips. “Why would the man have done away with himself if he’d just found a haul?”

“A haul isn’t everything,” I say to my cup. I feel Tom’s eyes on me, but he doesn’t speak.

“Maybe he didn’t do away with himself then,” says Leo, ignoring my comment. “Maybe someone done it for him.”

A fresh murmur ripples through the crowd, more drink-laden thrill than horror at the thought of there being a murderer among us.

“If someone did take him out, you could hardly blame them.” Martha, the landlady, speaks up from behind the barrels and wood planks that serve as the bar. “He were fond of swinging his fists, that Fred Buckley. Maybe he had a go at someone who didn’t half appreciate it.”

“Let’s ask him,” Clyde booms suddenly, waving his hand with the drink in it and spilling ale over his round belly. “You know, like them girls in America done, with the knocking on the walls. Talked to the dead and all, they did. Asked them all sorts of questions. Knock once for no, knock twice for yes, and all that.”

I rush another gulp of liquor. I suppose it was only a matter of time until we got here. Because ask any man on the street and they’ll tell you the dead are all around us. There’s something about this land, they say, as they toss back ales and speak in whispers. If you listen real hard and the wind blows the right way, you can hear the ghosts of the blackfellas drumming away, keeping watch over the mountains and creeks and the rusty open plains. These are the spirits, they say, that were here long before our ships arrived; those that carved the hills and rivers, and make this land seem to ripple in the dark. And then there are the ghosts we brought out on the ships with us: the banshees and the will-o’-the wisps, and that headless horseman

that turned out to be a dressmaker's mannequin someone pinched from the dust yard. The infamous Green Lady who walks Barker Street, despite there being no castle within ten thousand miles. Holding on to these stories makes home feel not quite so far away.

I don't believe in spooks. Never have. Before me and Tom came out from England, I spent five years scrubbing dishes at Hartwell Manor in Horley, a place so full of creaks and groans and ghost stories it was a wonder anyone ever got a wink of sleep. But while the other girls loved working themselves into a frenzy at every screech of the floorboards, I found the draughts and the shadows and the tricks of the light. I couldn't see the fun in having the dead living alongside you.

"What's he going to knock with?" demands Leo. "His hands got blown off."

"A ghost don't need hands," Clyde says matter-of-factly. "They knock with their soul."

I snort into my cup, earning a sideways glance from Tom.

"So what do we do then?" Leo scratches his matted beard. "Go back to his grave and just ask him some questions?"

"No point going to his grave," says Clyde. "He ain't there, is he. Just a few buttons and a shoe. Best off going to his claim. Where he died."

He heads for the door, causing a string of other men to follow.

"Let's go home," says Tom, tossing back the last of his liquor.

"No, I want to watch." There's something oddly enthralling about all this. While I didn't go in for ghost stories at Hartwell Manor, it feels strangely appealing to go along with them now. As though it might take me away from the bleakness of what my day-to-day life has become. Juxtaposed against all that deadness, maybe I'll remember what it is to feel alive.

I can practically see the indecision move across Tom's face. Stupidity, yes, but lately he agrees to anything that falls into the category of *making Lucy happy*. With an enormous sigh so there can be no doubt he's doing this under duress, he nods. Takes a firm grip on my arm and joins the procession across the diggings.



“Do you think there’s really a chance Buckley was murdered?” I ask as we weave through the claims. Holes yawn in the earth, signposted by tents at their edges. Smoke curls up from the campfires and disappears into the stars.

I try to keep my voice light. If Tom knew the men’s talk has worked its way beneath my skin, he’d be whisking me back home before you could say *knock twice for yes*.

“It was an accident, Luce,” he says. “That’s all. Black powder’s bloody unpredictable. Why do you think the most of us stay away from the stuff?”

But it is not a huge stretch to imagine we might be living beside a murderer. After all, the fact that we’re among thieves cannot be denied.

In a place where greed and desperation are this rife, petty thieving is a part of life. Gold nuggets and coins stolen from tents while men sleep. Pockets picked. Goods taken from shop shelves by men with light fingers. Barely a day goes by without a robbery being reported. The troopers have made a few half-hearted arrests – Chinamen and Irish usually – but none of them ever stick.

“Well,” says Tom, when I remind him of this, “petty thieving is one thing. Murder is something else. And I promise you there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I’m not worried,” I say. But I’m not sure if that’s true. My emotions feel clouded these days, as though I can’t quite catch hold of them long enough to read them.

We reach Fred Buckley’s claim. Or rather, what’s left of it. One by one, we climb over the rope set up by the police to mark the site of the incident. The side of the pit has been blown out in the blast, mounds of earth now filling the shaft. Blackened pieces of the windlass lie not far from the hole. It’s only a matter of time before some brassy sods are down there prospecting. If they haven’t been already.

We cluster around the ragged edge of the claim, Leo and Clyde shoving their way to the front. I realise I’m the only woman who’s bothered making the trek out here.

“Fred!” Clyde bellows. “Can you hear me? Who done this to you? Did you do away with yourself? Knock once for no, twice for yes.”

“On the windlass, Fred,” Leo adds. “Knock on the windlass.”

Everyone falls silent. Waiting. Even I can’t pull my eyes from the broken windlass lying by Clyde’s feet.

Nothing.

“Were you murdered, Fred?” calls Leo, his face furrowed with such seriousness I’d laugh if I wasn’t standing where some poor bastard was just blasted to pieces.

Still no knocking. In the forest behind us, an owl shrieks.

“Fred? You there, man?”

“This is madness.” Tom’s hand wrenches around my arm, and we’re marching away suddenly from Buckley’s claim.

“Tom. You’re hurting me.”

“Sorry.” He lets his hand fall. “Watch yourself. The—”

“The claims are hard to see in the dark. Yes, I know.”

We walk back towards our cottage in near silence, the newly erected streetlamps throwing yellow light onto the road. Trees tower on either side of us, their white trunks ghostly in the semi-darkness.

“Madness,” Tom says again. And then, “Poor Fred. How could those bastards be so disrespectful?”

I give a short smile. “I think Fred’s past caring if he’s disrespected.”

“You think?”

I don’t answer. We fall back into our usual silence until we reach the cottage. It sits lightless on the corner of a new row of houses, close to where the town of Castlemaine gives way to the bush. Tom slides the key into the lock.

And then, *crack, crack, crack* – the emptying of the guns, in perfect synchronicity with the turning of the key. Every night this comes; this sudden violent outburst from the diggings that hem the town. And every night it manages to scare me.

Nothing to be afraid of, Tom has assured me. Guns emptied in the night to

prevent the ammunition becoming damp. There are those who say the emptying of the guns is not a measure of maintenance but a warning to would-be thieves. Stay away from my tent. Hear what I've got in store for you if you try and cross me.

To me, hundreds of weapons roaring together each night is a reminder of how fragile this life is. How easily it could be any one of us lying in the earth, with Clyde trying to get us to knock on the damn windlass. A reminder of how many ways there are to die here.

The last echoes of gunfire are swallowed by the night, the burn of powder faint on the air. And just as I do every evening when the pistols are emptied into this eternal sky, I imagine myself screaming.

## CHAPTER TWO

*“To those of my own sex who desire to emigrate to Australia, I say do by all means, if you can go under suitable protection, possess good health, are not fastidious or ‘fine-ladylike,’ can milk cows, churn butter, cook a good damper, and mix a pudding. ... But to those who cannot wait upon themselves, and whose fair fingers are unused to the exertion of doing anything useful, my advice is, for your own sakes remain at home.”*

Ellen Clacy

*A Lady's Visit to the Gold Diggings of Australia*

1852

I'm up at dawn, boiling pots of tea and porridge before Tom heads out to the diggings. The kitchen is sweltering with firelight and steam, and carries the faint stale smell of the laundry I've to do today. Our little stone cottage is neatly divided in two; one half the bedroom, the other, the living quarters. The kitchen is

crammed with a fireplace and dining table; shelves lined with cups and plates, and pots hanging along the walls.

I take the pot of porridge from the hook above the fire and fill two bowls, kicking muddy boots out from under my feet.

Tom comes in from the bedroom, his shirt half untucked and his vest hanging open. His fair hair is in dire need of a brush. The lines in his forehead always look more pronounced in the mornings.

He lifts the teapot from the middle of the table and fills a cup, sleepy-eyed. “I think I dreamt about Fred Buckley.”

I give him a short smile. After the long trudge home from Forest Creek, I fell into far too deep a sleep to dream.

With the cooking done, I toss a bowl of water into the fireplace to put out the flames. Open the window to let the steam curl out of it. Hot summer air blows in in its place.

Tom takes a gulp of tea. “I got a good feeling today, Luce. This might be the one.” His smile looks as forced as his enthusiasm. I don’t answer. I’ve run out of appropriate responses.

When Tom bought his mining license three years ago and was given his first claim, it seemed like such a glamorous thing. Here he was in charge of this little piece of the colony of Victoria – never mind that it was just a few feet across. We went to stand on it together, smiling at each other as our boots sank into the mud. I imagined all the gold hidden beneath our feet, ready to be brought up into the light. That little piece of earth, we were both so certain, would see us live a life of luxury until the day we died.

And down into the earth Tom went, sure it would only be a matter of time before he brought up things that glittered. And yes, he brought gold back to that lopsided tent we called home; tiny fragments wrapped in handkerchiefs, tucked into his pockets. In those early days, when they first divided up the land, the earth

practically shone. They said if you walked Moonlight Flat with grease on your boots, the gold would stick to the soles.

The first time Tom came home with that tiny suggestion of treasure, we sat at the table and stared at the flecks shimmering in his handkerchief. It felt like a beginning; the start of a golden future in which we would rise above our station and be something we could never have dreamt of being in England. We'd have wealth and luxury, and a life of sipping tea on some grand balcony; me and Tom and the child inside me, conceived in that tiny ship's cabin, with nothing around us but sea.

But there was never more than specks and scraps. And while the men in the surrounding claims pulled nuggets the size of walnuts from the mud of Forest Creek, my husband's land never gave up more than gold dust. He worked from first light until sunset or even later, digging and cradling by lamplight. But finding gold, we both came to realise, was as much about luck as it was about skill and dedication.

Now, almost three years after our arrival in Australia, Tom is working a claim with Leo, a Cornishman he met at Murphy's Hotel. This time, he says, things will be different. No more scraps. Just nuggets the size of walnuts.

With Leo's tin mining expertise, they shored the walls of the claim and burrowed far deeper into the earth than Tom went the first time. Constructed a windlass from a felled tree to bring loads up from the shaft.

But I've stopped waiting for Tom to bring home that nugget. Have come to the conclusion that this is not how our lives are supposed to go. When will he come to the same realisation? Perhaps he already has.

Tom is out the door with the rising sun. I take the breakfast dishes to the trough to wash them, then check on the laundry fluttering on the line at the back of the cottage. It's dried slightly stiff in the hot wind. I pull each shirt, each sheet, each nightshirt from the line and place them in neatly marked bundles, ready to be collected by their owners.

Far too many men on the diggings, I learnt early on, have no thought of how to use a washboard. And in the absence of their wives, their mothers, their housekeepers, a woman can make a good penny washing clothes.

One, two, three bundles of clothing collected and paid for as the day wears on. I pull out the small wooden box hidden beneath our bed. It's empty apart from a few tiny gold pieces, barely enough to make a single sovereign. I toss in the coins, ready for banking later in the week, then tuck the box back under the mattress. I grab my bonnet and head to the Sunday School building for my theatre rehearsal.

The theatre troupe, well that was Tom's idea. A means of distraction. A way to make new friends and move past my grief. I wasn't sure my grief was something I was supposed to move past. But when the young and dashing Will Browning strutted into Castlemaine in his top hat and announced the opening of his new amateur theatre troupe, Tom was adamant I attend.

"You love the theatre," he insisted, though my only experience of such a thing was a church Christmas play when I was nine. Dressed in my most beatific white nightgown, I'd dithered behind the other angels and said my one line – "*Fear not, for we bring you tidings of great joy*" – in such an inaudible voice that one of the other girls had to repeat it.

Nevertheless, I trudged along to the first meeting of Mr Browning's little troupe, determined to despise it.

Somewhat infuriatingly, I did not despise it. For two hours, I sat through a bungled reading of *Macbeth* and prompted the actors with their lines, and had more fun than I'd had in what felt like forever. I came home and offered Tom a begrudging smile. Couldn't help but admit there *was* something I rather loved about the theatre, even though the thought of actually stepping onto stage terrified me.

The ridiculousness of that is not lost on me.

The group had its first performance last month – a half-baked pantomime, performed in the middle of Barker Street and attended mostly by people who

wandered out of the tavern and accidentally found themselves in the audience. I stood in the front row and hissed out forgotten lines to those few actors who weren't performing open-book. Did a stellar job of packing the costumes away afterwards.

Beside the hastily constructed Sunday School building, the half-built church emerges from the earth like rock stacks rising from the ocean. Rough wooden scaffolding hides much of the construction, but I see the beginnings of a spire straining towards the sky.

I let myself into the Sunday School, a box of a building with desks crammed in rows and the perpetual smell of chalk and children. Most of the group is already here. They've pulled chairs up around the larger table at the front of the room and are chattering loudly. I weave through the rows of desks and shuffle a chair onto the corner of the table. Edith Markham, with her steel-grey hair and matching face, sets a glass of lukewarm lemonade in front of me.

There are five or six of us who usually turn up to rehearsals, the number swelling or dwindling depending on what play we're reading, and if it's raining too hard to go to the diggings. Edith and I are staunch regulars, and so is the painfully dazzling Clara Snow, the only one of the group with any theatre experience whatsoever.

Well, unless you count my one line in the Christmas play. Which I don't.

Today, Ollie Cooper is here, as is the prime know-it-all, Arthur Wallace. Ollie is a good friend of Tom's, and I know he only comes here for a laugh, while Mr Wallace seems to harbour secret dreams of being the next William Don. Wallace is a wealthy Londoner who pushes papers in the Gold Commissioner's camp; Ollie among the mass of Irishmen come out to escape the Great Hunger.

"Hear about them fossickers last night?" he asks no one in particular. "Out on Moonlight Flat. Some lads come out of their tents and seen lamplight in their claims. Thieves were out of there before they could catch them."

Hardly surprising, given half the settlement was knee deep in moonshine last night, trying to hear Fred Buckley's ghost bashing away on the windlass. There were likely more than a few unguarded claims around the diggings.

"It's those damn Chinese," Mr Wallace snorts, crossing one leg over the other. "Can't be trusted."

"A little predictable, don't you think?" Clara Snow swans into the room, letting the door thump closed behind her. "Anything goes wrong in this place and it's poor old Johnny Chinaman to blame." She takes a chair from behind one of the desks and carries it to the table, lemon perfume wafting in her wake. I shuffle over to make room for her.

Wallace's cheeks turn red in annoyance. "And with good reason. Thieving's been twice as bad since they turned up."

Clara takes off her bonnet and settles into her chair. She pours herself a glass from the jug of lemonade on the table. "Why would they go to the trouble of stealing from the white man? They find more in a day than the most of you find in a week. They must be far more methodical than you lot who just going around swinging your shovels."

Wallace gives her a thin smile. "I must say, Miss Snow, you have quite an opinion on the matter for a woman of your inclination."

Clara's eyes flash, but whatever fierce words she's about to fling out are cut off as Will Browning charges through the door, apologising for his lateness. In his neat frock coat and silver cravat, he somehow manages to look impossibly dashing, despite being so pink and flustered I suspect he may have run here. He slides his armful of bound booklets onto the table ceremoniously. I feel myself straighten in my chair.

Today, well, what an important day it is in the life of the Castlemaine Amateur Theatre Group. The unveiling of Will Browning's new play. An original work written just for us. The ridiculousness of that is not lost on me either.



According to Clara, Mr Browning was a semi-professional dramatist in London, bursting onto the theatre scene at the age of just eighteen, with a play that was wildly successful. Almost a decade has passed since, and judging by the calibre of actor he is now writing for, I can only assume his career has taken something of a wrong turn. Nonetheless, there's a thrill to having been written a piece by a man who once walked the London stage.

As I discover when Mr Browning passes the booklets around the table for us to read, it's not just the men at Fred Buckley's claim who have their heads firmly lodged in the land of the dead.

*"The Lady of Fyvie,"* Clara reads.

"Ah, the Green Lady of Fyvie Castle, I presume." Mr Wallace chuckles as he turns the pages, his animosity at Clara momentarily forgotten. "My dear old granny used to tell me ghost stories about her when I was a lad. Used to scare me half to death."

Clara flicks Mr Browning a smile. "You've certainly managed to find a topic that's all the rage."

I've heard this story too; this folktale he's based his new play on. The woman murdered by her husband in a Scottish castle, who somewhat predictably proceeded to haunt the place for all eternity.

"Been listening in on a few conversations at the tavern, have you, Will?" Ollie chuckles. "There's been talk of sightings of the Green Lady for months now."

Mr Browning sits in the chair left empty for him at the head of the table. He takes off his top hat and sets it beside him. "Indeed." His brown eyes shine boyishly. "I believe one sighting even made it into the papers."

Edith clucks as she turns the pages. "What's this world coming to?"

I open my copy of the script, a small smile on my lips. I think of stealing my older brother's Penny Bloods and hiding in the wardrobe to read them.

We've brought our myths and legends with us to this place; stories to remind us of home, to keep us linked to what we know. The Green Lady walking the streets of Castlemaine is a fragile thread tying us back to our homeland.

I skim through the first few pages. The play has all the mystery and horror of a Penny Blood; Lord Fyvie and his new bride haunted to near madness by the ghostly Green Lady, the vengeful spirit of the Lord's first wife.

The role of Lady Fyvie will obviously go to Clara, the only one of us with anything even resembling the ability to act. The story goes that she was sent over as a convict; spent a few years sewing shirts at the female factory in Hobart before dazzling her overseer into submission and winning her ticket of leave. I have no idea if that's true and am far too terrified of the woman to ask her. The story also goes that in England, Clara was a burlesque performer, thrilling audiences around London with ballad operas and breeches roles. Though I'm simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by the idea, I'm far too scared to ask about that too. I can't imagine what a woman like her is doing in Castlemaine.

The role of Lady Fyvie in Will Browning's new play is hardly Drury Lane, but when he invites Clara to take the lead, she gives him a suitably coy smile and says, "I'd be honoured."

He turns to me. "Mrs Earnshaw, I thought perhaps you might like to read the role of the Green Lady."

My stomach loops. I don't *read* anything. That's not why I'm here. The horror is unthinkable.

"Oh no," I say quickly. "I couldn't. I—"

Mr Browning falters. "You do have your letters, don't you? I'm sorry, I thought—"

"Yes," I say, then wish I hadn't. I've just blown the perfect way out. "But I..."

"Just a reading," he assures me. "You'd be helping me get a sense of the character. Determine whether her lines need work."

I chew my lip. It's mortifying. I'm not here to perform. I'm the line-prompter. The floor-sweeper. The tea-refiller. But I can see the stupidity of joining a theatre troupe and refusing to even read out a few lines. And so, I nod. Besides, the Green Lady is dead. How many lines can she possibly have?

Mr Browning flashes me a bright smile. "Wonderful." He assigns the rest of the parts before opening his manuscript to the first page.

Clara hurls herself into the read as though she were back in the theatre in London, while I tiptoe through my lines in a miniscule voice.

"A little louder, please, Mrs Earnshaw," says Browning, "if you wouldn't mind."

"Well done, Lucy," Edith Markham says dutifully as we make our way out of the Sunday School two hours later. A pleasantly cool breeze rustles the trees, cicadas wailing somewhere in the half-built church. "Shall I see you home?" she asks, tucking a worn carpet bag into the crook of her arm.

The two of us have the kind of friendship that comes from there being few better options. Edith and her husband came out from Manchester, long before Hargraves found those first flecks of gold and the place went madder than a sack of badgers. They'd been full of the same dreams of a new life Tom and I once shared – a life of adventure and success and enough money to bathe in. Twenty years later, Edith is a widow to smallpox, and her sense of adventure seems to have been thoroughly trampled out of her. Nonetheless, when the world flocked to Victoria to dig treasures from the earth, she carted a few of her children down here and opened a general store in her eldest son's name. Now she's a necessity for all the new arrivals; her shelves lined with shovels and gold pans, billies and bed rolls, ropes and coats and pistols and shot.

Edith is stiff and achingly sensible, a trait she claims has allowed her to get so far in such a challenging place. And yes, a trait I have to admire. But it is not a trait that allows for a close friendship.

"I can see myself home," I tell her. "I've to stop at the market on the way."

We make neat goodbyes and I turn in the direction of the grocer. The sound of footsteps stops me. Will Browning is striding from the school, a copy of the script held against his chest and his frock coat open casually. How different he is to so many of the other men here; wool and silk in place of stained corduroy; clean shaven, with not a grimy, earth-caked fingernail in sight. So polished he almost looks out of place. I can count on one hand the number of times we've spoken directly to each other. Usually it ends with me garbling out a flustered response, and then agonising over it for hours afterwards.

He jogs to catch up to me, making my heart quicken inexplicably. "Thank you for coming, Mrs Earnshaw. And thank you for your reading."

I nod mutely.

"What did you think of the play?" he asks, with something oddly resembling shyness.

"I enjoyed it," I say, finding my voice. "Very much." The play is well written – at least it seems that way to my untrained eye – and the story is thrilling. I enjoyed reading the Green Lady's part far more than I expected I would.

Mr Browning's face lights. I'm surprised by it. I imagined him far too self-assured to be bothered by the opinion of some dough-faced washerwoman.

"You created a haunting atmosphere," I tell him solemnly.

*A haunting atmosphere?* I curse myself. Just when did I become so afternooned?

"I'm glad to hear that. It was something I was striving for."

I carry on. And on. "Well, you certainly managed it. Like that part when we learn how the Green Lady died. And when the Lord and Lady see her for the first time, well I thought I was going to jump right out of my skin. I really did, even though I was reading the part myself and I..."

*Stop talking, Lucy.*

My cheeks get hot.

He gives me a kind smile. "Good. I hope it will have the same effect on the audience."

I pause, mercifully, for a breath. “The people here will love it, I’m sure.”

“Do you think so?”

“Oh yes. Last night they were out at the claim of Fred Buckley, who blew himself up. Trying to speak to his ghost, if you can believe it.”

Mr Browning digs his free hand into the pocket of his coat. “Yes, I heard about that poor fellow. Bloody awful, wasn’t it.”

I nod.

“Did they do it?” he asks suddenly.

I blink. “Pardon?”

“Those men who went to Buckley’s claim. Did they speak to his ghost?”

“Oh.” I give a short laugh. “No, of course not.”

“I see.” He holds my gaze for a moment with his rich coffee eyes. “Thank you for your kind words, Mrs Earnshaw. It means a lot. And thank you again for the reading.”

And I wander dazedly off to the market in entirely the wrong direction.

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