



Wide Sky People

The Thornton Series
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This is a work of fiction. Names and characters are either the products of the author's imagination, or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

The one exception to the above is the character of Sir Henry Parkes; colonial Australian politician and longest serving non-consecutive Premier of the Colony of New South Wales. In reference to chapter 15, Sir Henry did in fact open the new railway link to Orange in 1877; but the attempted assassination contained in that chapter is entirely a product of my own imagination. I am greatly indebted to Ian Thom, Chairman of the Henry Parkes Foundation, and Great-Great Grandson of Sir Henry, for his permission to include the contents of chapter 15 in its entirety.

This book is dedicated to my wife Marilyn; for whose support, patience and incisive critiques I am eternally grateful.

Chapter 1

Tuesday 5 October 1841.

Mick Thornton leaned on the ship's rail in the hot morning sun while Sydney Cove's tide of humanity went about its business. The *William Turner* eased into dock at about 4 a.m. the night before, and had Mick and his family enjoyed the luxury of a porthole, they'd have seen a three-quarter moon shimmering over the finest harbour in the world.

At 33 years of age, Mick's body was hard and lean from years of work on a Galway farm. His face was open and strong, with clear blue eyes under a thatch of unruly dark hair. At just over six feet tall with a ramrod bearing, a passer-by would consider him someone to be taken seriously. Elbows on the rail, he puffed on his pipe and surveyed the shores of Sydney Cove.

A couple of frigates were unloading cargo at the government wharves, their decks alive with the movement and colour of wharf labourers sweating under their loads. On the eastern edge of the cove a headland was crowned with tall eucalypts flecked with white cockatoos. Behind the quay the rusty rooves and church spires of Sydney Town stretched away up the rise into the morning haze. Horse-drawn carts, wagons and pedestrians of every description moved along the foreshore while a contingent of red-coated Royal Marines marched through the western precinct known as "The Rocks".

After leaving home in Kilcroan, County Galway almost five months before, to Mick's eyes, Sydney was a beguiling new frontier. Ireland had become bleak in recent years; ever-increasing taxes and the meagre income of a tenant farmer made it almost impossible to support a wife and two children. Winters were becoming harder, with many a parent forced to feed their children with wild plants foraged from the moors. Although his heart felt a tug for the green hills of Ireland and the extended family he left behind, he nonetheless felt the thrill of expectancy that this new land might be one of hope and fulfilment.

A cry from behind brought him out of reverie and he turned just in time to swoop up his two boys, Michael Jr and John, into his arms. Mick's wife Cate crossed the deck to join them.

'Daddy! We saw fishes in the water. Can we catch them?' Michael, aged six, was the eldest by one year. He had his father's features and a thatch of black hair, while John was the image of his mother, with an angular face under a mop of curly chestnut.

'Well matey, we don't have any lines, but perhaps they'll be kind enough to jump up and land on deck,' Mick remarked to his boys with a smile.

'We could fry them up for tea,' added Cate, slipping her arm through Mick's and giving him a wink. Two years younger than Mick, Cate was a handsome woman with a mane of long chestnut hair who looked much younger than her 31 years. She was the rock that held the family together; it was her drive that instigated the family's escape from Ireland.

Their journey began with an arduous three-day cart ride from Galway to Cork over rutted country roads in the teeth of cold winds sweeping across the Irish

landscape. At Cork Harbour they stood on the dock, staring up at the steamer that was making ready to cast off and take them away from everything they knew and held dear.

Mick turned to Cate. 'It's not too late love, we can still turn around and go back home.'

Cate held her husband's gaze. 'No, Mick, these boys of ours deserve a better life than tilling someone else's land till they drop from overwork. Our future's on that boat.'

Mick nodded assent, and hoisting their sea-chest on his shoulder, started up the gangway.

The 30-hour trip across the Irish Sea to Southampton was to prove the worst way to begin their long voyage to Australia. Many other migrating families had trekked to Cork to undertake the same journey, and it was soon clear to Mick that it would be a crowded one. The unscrupulous captain, like many who plied this route, devoted the space below decks to valuable cargo while the luckless passengers were left to huddle together in the open. For 30 hours, through bitter cold, driving rain and howling winds, the steamer ploughed and pitched through turbulent seas. Mick and Cate sheltered the boys as best they could, and families hugged together to retain body heat. Mick would have delighted in lifting the captain over his head and hurling him into the Irish Sea, if he could have found his feet on the rolling deck. Although the passengers survived the journey, one older gentleman passed away within a couple of days of their arrival in England.

The *William Turner*, a fully rigged ship of 488 tons built in 1833, set sail from Southampton harbour on a rising tide on the afternoon of Wednesday, 16 June 1841. Gulls flapped and squawked overhead as deckhands hoisted sails against the backdrop of a grey,

cloud-covered sky. Canvas billowed and a strong following breeze plunged the ship's bow into the choppy green of the English Channel. The 202 passengers on board, consisting of 187 immigrants in steerage and 15 paying passengers on the upper deck, were to spend a total of 111 days at sea.

The regular route taken by sailing vessels to Australia in the 1840s was to "beat out" from the English Channel against the prevailing westerly winds and head south through the Bay of Biscay into the North Atlantic. Once reaching the latitude of the Canary Islands (28.30 N), they'd pick up the North East trade winds into the equatorial regions, then on to the South Atlantic where the "roaring forties" from the west would blow the ship eastward to Australia. It was not uncommon for some of the faster vessels to complete the journey non-stop, however, nothing is certain at sea, and fickle winds, gales and unseen shoals could delay the ship, or perhaps even send it to the bottom, as was the fate of many a ship before the *William Turner*.

Conditions on board for steerage passengers were less than ideal. Single and unaccompanied women were quartered separately and families were grouped together. Berths for married couples were arranged on each side of the steerage deck, and down the centre was a long row of tables with bench seats for eating and communal space. The sleeping berths themselves measured only three-by-six feet and were separated by a timber beam at either end, measuring only 10 inches high. Clearly, privacy was not one of the amenities on offer to steerage passengers. The Thornton boys shared a berth, which unsurprisingly led to territorial clashes on the voyage. Bedding consisted of thin blankets thrown over straw, and the entire steerage deck was served by only two toilets. Ventilation was poor, with the only air circulation coming from a narrow stairway leading to

the upper deck, and small vents along the sides of the ship which were closed in poor weather.

For the passengers aboard the *William Turner*, a voyage to the other side of the world would have been equivalent to travelling to Mars in the twenty-first century. They were leaving everything; home, family and country, on a dangerous voyage to an unknown land from which they would probably never return. Their future was entirely uncertain. Some of them came with little more than the clothes they wore when boarding, and they would land on an alien shore with little or no support. They were very courageous people indeed, and sustained themselves in the hope that the Australian colonies would be a land of promise. Mick and Cate were no different, and they feared more for their children than themselves. Cate wore her silver St Christopher medallion around her neck, and developed the habit of holding it whenever the seas began to rise, placing her faith in the patron saint of travellers.

Late one afternoon, several days out from Southampton, the crow's nest lookout spotted a bank of black clouds rising rapidly over the horizon.

'Storm on the starboard bow!'

'Secure the rigging!' came the captain's order and the crew scampered into the shrouds. Sails were quickly furled and hatches secured; the ship would have to ride out the storm and hope for the best. The wind until a few minutes before was a gentle nudge from the southwest, but it suddenly became a howling banshee that struck the ship with its full force, heeling it so far over that the spars almost dipped into the sea. The storm tossed the *William Turner* like a cork, and the hapless passengers secured below decks cried out in terror as the seas raged. Seasickness was everywhere and in the cramped quarters the stench was unbearable. Anything that was not securely lashed down became a projectile;

sea chests snapped their restraints and slid up and down the aisles like a runaway train as the ship ploughed into huge swells. Mick and Cate held the two boys and braced themselves against timber posts embedded into the deck. The storm continued through the night, giving no-one the benefit of sleep, and it was only with the first light of dawn that conditions started to ease.

A few days after the storm, the ship ventured into equatorial waters where they faced unreliable winds, and were becalmed for several days on long, slow, glassy swells in unbearable heat. The sails hung limply and the ship was eerily quiet after so many days of violence at the mercy of the elements. The heat below decks became unbearable, and passengers were permitted on decks in shifts to take any advantage they could of the fitful warm puffs of air. These conditions were a danger sign for the outbreak of disease, and despite regular cleaning and airing of bedding, cases of dysentery and scarlet fever began to appear. It was during this time that the ship's only fatalities were to occur. Three young children and two adults succumbed to sickness, and were buried at sea.

After a zigzag tacking journey toward South America the *William Turner* finally came about and picked up the roaring forties that carried them eastward around the Cape of Good Hope and on to Australia. Following winds drove the ship across the broad Indian Ocean to within sight of the western coast of Australia in good time, and in spite of gales, sickness and death, the immigrants in search of a new start finally entered the safety of Sydney Harbour.

The family had applied for assisted immigration under the "Bounty" system. The colony was facing a labour shortage, and sought to lure suitable immigrants from Britain. Mick, being a farmer, qualified for the

scheme. The master of the *William Turner* was required to retain bounty immigrants on board until government officials checked their state of health and personal particulars. There were many instances of people falsifying their skills and age to gain entry to the colony, and some had been sent back on the next ship to England. Although the Thornton family was impatient to get their feet on dry land, it was two days before the way was clear, and on Thursday 7 October the family hefted their meagre possessions and disembarked with the other immigrants. A detachment of Royal Marines waited on the dock, and after all were accounted for, escorted them to a single level brick building in lower George Street. Each family would undergo interrogation by a board of officials which would decide whether they were to be admitted to the Colony under the Bounty System.

After several hours, Mick, Cate and the children were ushered into a bare-floored hearing room to stand before the board of three stern-faced officials seated behind a large table. On the left of the trio was a round-faced clergyman mopping his brow with a handkerchief. The middle man, who appeared to be in charge, was officious-looking with a thin, hawkish nose and a scowl behind his wire spectacles. He wore a grey suit, high-collared shirt and tie. By the uniform, the man on the right looked to be a policeman.

From the look and attitude of the three inquisitors, Mick had the distinct impression he was on trial, and although he had never fallen foul of the law, in Ireland, one became used to being looked down upon by those who considered themselves superior. Mick, Cate and the children were dressed in the best clothes they owned, but they appeared shabby and worn compared to the men they faced. *'I may be poor,'* thought Mick, *'but I'm not about to be subservient, nor show any particular*

deference to these men.’ He was free, not beholden to anyone, and was not about to be intimidated.

‘State your name,’ commanded the middle official in a bored voice without looking up from his papers.

‘Michael Thornton.’

‘Your place of birth?’

‘Parish of Kilcroan, County Galway.’

‘And your family?’

‘My wife Catherine and sons Michael and John.’

‘I see you are registered as a...’ (he gave a look of disdain over his glasses) ‘farm labourer?’ His tone dripped with sarcasm.

Mick’s jaw tightened at the slight. ‘No sir, there’s a difference between a labourer and a farmer. In Galway I managed a farm with crops and livestock; I did not merely labour in the fields.’

‘That may or may not be true, Mr. Thornton, but how do we know whether you are who you say you are, and what makes you think that a mere farm labourer can contribute to the wellbeing of this great colony?’

Mick locked eyes with the man and held his gaze. ‘Well, sir, if you asked that question in Kilcroan, you’d be told that Mick Thornton is an honest man whose word can be trusted.’

Hawknose looked over his spectacles again. ‘Well, you may or may not be a big man in Ireland, Mr Thornton, but we are Her Royal Majesty’s representatives in the colony of New South Wales, and you must convince the Crown of your bona-fides for immigration, or you and your family will be denied access.’

Mick had experienced this type of petty officialdom in Ireland, particularly from Englishmen who were fond of denigrating the Irish; whose land they now occupied and drew wealth from at the expense of those who had worked and loved it for centuries. His ire began to rise, but he kept it in check and focussed on his inquisitors.

He addressed all three behind the table. 'I'm told this colony is short of people who know how to work a farm, and I've spent my life on the land, tending crops and animals so they can produce food for people such as your good selves. Now I understand there's a lot of fine land out there in need of farming. It might be a damn sight hotter and drier than I knew in Galway, but it's land nonetheless.'

Mick walked three steps to the edge of the table. Each man shifted back in his seat as the big man held out his hands, palms up. For an instant Mick thought he sensed the policeman lower his hand to where his pistol would be. Nonetheless, he continued.

'Look at these hands. They're rough, not pink and pretty, and they didn't get that way inside a church,' (Mick looked at the clergyman) 'or behind a desk' (then at the chairman). They're calloused, hard and scarred, but they know how to work the land, bend to the wind and harness the rain. They know how to shoe a horse, milk a cow and swing a pick. Gentlemen, these hands, and my wife and children here behind me, are my bonafides and my passport. I've come to this land with the intention to work hard and make a new life for my family, and by God, I aim to do just that.'

Later, sitting on a bench outside in George Street with their papers stamped with approval, Cate looked up at Mick and laughed. 'Sure, Mr Thornton, and I haven't heard you string so many words together since you made that drunken speech at your cousin's wedding! If

those three had leant any further back in their chairs they'd have fallen over backwards.'

Mick smiled as he held her about the waist and looked into her eyes. 'It must be the air here in Sydney, Caty,' he said with a smile, 'you just breathe it in, and out comes the blarney.'

The Thornton family had cleared its first hurdle and become official immigrants to the colony of New South Wales. Mick had heard that the best opportunity to find work and settle the family was the Bathurst district in the Central West, and that meant a long trek across the Blue Mountains. But with very little money, and exhausted from their nearly five months at sea, they needed time to find their feet in this strange new land. They'd have to find somewhere to live, and Mick needed a job in a hurry to pay their way and hopefully save a little for the trip.

Their timing however was not ideal; the colony had suffered an economic downturn over the past couple of years. A severe drought from 1838 to 1840 had lowered wheat production and led to costly imports. Britain was also experiencing a financial slowdown, adding to the colony's woes. A couple of banks had already gone under. Money was scarce and jobs were not easy to come by.

Mick was able to find a boarding house in Playfair St, The Rocks, where he secured a room for the family at two shillings a week. At that rate, without work, they'd exhaust their meagre savings very quickly. The boarding house, owned by an older couple, George and Emily Dawson, was a two-storey brick building with five guest bedrooms and a three-room apartment for the Dawson's, only a short distance from the heart of Sydney.

Mick took to the streets in search of a job. Starting at the docks and working his way up the narrow, criss-cross of Sydney roads and laneways, he knocked on doors; houses, shops, warehouses, pubs, even churches, but it was slow going. After a couple of days, he picked up a temporary job at the wharves, loading ships. It was backbreaking work, even for a big man; lifting large sacks of wheat on his back and hauling them up gangways and down into ships' holds in all weather, and sometimes round the clock. It was also dangerous work, with the occasional watermen, as these labourers were known, slipping and plunging onto the stone wharf or the bottom of a ship's cargo hold. After three days, when Mick was told the work had run out, he was not sorry to be gone.

Two weeks had passed, and his natural optimism began to wear down as he was bumped and scraped along the sharp rocks of disappointment. He was wearing out most of what remained of his shoes, and as money was dwindling, was eating less each day to stretch the purse. He was beginning to wonder if he'd made a mistake coming to this land, that was so far failing to live up to its promise.

It was a warm afternoon on Friday 29 October when after another soul-destroying day of job-searching, he sat forlornly on a stone bench on the edge of Hyde Park. A steady crowd of people milled by, heading up the rise toward Darlinghurst. All shapes and sizes, men, women and children, dogs and horses, joined the fray, calling out to each other, laughing and 'acting the goat' in an almost carnival atmosphere. As a young lad passed by, Mick asked him where they were all going.

'There's a double-hanging up at Darlo Jail. Two murderers are gunna swing this arvo!' said the boy as he sauntered up the hill.

A small contingent of mounted police stood on the corner of Oxford and College Streets where the crowd was passing. Idly watching the scene in the late afternoon heat, Mick noticed that one of the riders had dismounted, and was examining his mount's hind leg. He rose from the bench and wandered over to take a closer look. The policeman glanced at Mick when he approached, took in his tattered clothes and returned to his examination.

'Fine animal,' said Mick.

'Not so fine right now,' replied the man without looking up. 'Looks as if she's gone lame. She won't take her own weight.'

Mick bent down to examine the horse. 'Mind if I take a look?' The man shrugged his assent. Lifting the horse's fetlock, he probed the joint carefully. 'She has some swelling. Has she taken a knock recently?'

The policeman turned and narrowed his eyes to take a closer look at Mick. 'You know something about horses?'

Mick paused and looked up at the clear blue Sydney sky and could almost smell the scent of stable hay in his Galway farm, and hear the gentle snorts of the horses he tended as a youth. He smiled back at the man, 'I was shovelling horse shit and nailing shoes before I could write my name.' Mick looked down again at the injury. 'If she hasn't had a hard knock to that leg, she's not lame. There's some swelling at the bottom of the joint. My guess is it's an infection that should be treated with a sulphur poultice, the sooner the better, or it'll get much worse.'

The policeman eyed Mick again. 'I'm Sergeant O'Sullivan. I was taking her back to the stables to get someone to look at her, but our stableman quit last week and we're short on help. Can you give me a hand?'

Two hours later at the Belmore police stables in Elizabeth Street, Mick was applying the final touches to the poultice. O'Sullivan had watched the procedure from start to finish, and as Mick tied off the bandage, he remarked, 'Jessie's been my mount for the last two years. We've been through a few scrapes together, and she's a fine horse. I doubt whether our stableman could have done as good a job as you have. I'm indebted to you, Mick.'

Mick looked up with a grin. 'In the last two hours I've felt more useful than I have for the last six months. The pleasure's all mine, Sergeant.'

'No offence, Mick, but by the look of your shoes and the lilt of your strong Galway accent, I'd say you've landed on these shores recently and have been a while looking for a start in this colony,' said O'Sullivan.

Mick smiled, 'Never try to hide anything from a policeman, right, Sergeant?'

O'Sullivan paused for a moment then looked up and continued, 'Come back here tomorrow afternoon. I'll talk to a couple of people, and by the way, the name's Patrick.' Mick shook his outstretched hand.

The temperature had eased by late afternoon as Mick made his way back to Playfair Street. A north-easterly breeze had sprung up, carrying salty air from the harbour. Slanting shafts of sunlight caught George Street's sandstone buildings and lit them with warm honey. Mick was in a contemplative mood as he recounted the events of the day and his unexpected good fortune.

He was disappointed with himself for falling into a pit of hopelessness at not finding a job. How does a man sink into self-pity, and almost surrender to it, only to be pulled to the surface again by random events beyond his control? He should have known better than to let

circumstances so easily dictate his thoughts and actions, and promised himself this would not happen again. His heart lifted and he relished the challenge of tomorrow, regardless of what it would bring. His step lightened as he turned left up Playfair Street toward home.

The next afternoon under a leaden sky Mick made the walk to Belmore and the Mounted Police barracks. He left his name for Patrick O'Sullivan at the front desk and wandered down to the stables to check on Jessie. The horse was still favouring her right rear leg, but on closer inspection it looked to Mick that the swelling had reduced overnight. He patted Jessie on the nose as she nudged him gently. He was happy he'd made the right decision to treat the infection.

Voices interrupted his thoughts and he turned to see the Sergeant accompanied by another man in uniform. O'Sullivan offered Mick his hand. 'Mick, this is Captain Matthew Burke, commander of the Mounted Police at Belmore. Captain, this is Mick Thornton, the fellow I told you about.'

Burke was slimly built and a head shorter than Mick. He exuding the confidence that comes with rank, and the twinkle in his eye spoke of good humour. He sported a well-tended handle-bar moustache and a ready smile. 'I hear you worked some magic with Sergeant O'Sullivan's mount yesterday, Mr Thornton?'

Mick shook his hand. 'It was a pleasure to tend a fine animal like Jessie, Captain.'

Burke replied, 'Jessie's something of a celebrity here at Belmore. She was a racehorse until a few years ago, and won the Macquarie Stakes by five lengths in '38. They still talk about her at the track. Thanks to you, she'll have some more life left in our regiment.'

Burke glanced at O'Sullivan and continued. 'Mick, the Sergeant tells me you're in the market for a job. Frankly, we've found that there aren't many fellows in Sydney who know the difference between a horse's head and its arse, but it appears that you do. We need a stableman who can get his hands dirty, but you clearly know a bit about the scalpel as well as the shovel, so we'd like to offer you a little more than stableman's wages. Are you interested?'

Mick's face erupted in a smile. 'Yes, Captain, I most certainly am.'

'Right then.' Burke turned to O'Sullivan, 'Sergeant, please take care of the details, and first up, see if you can ahhh, scare up a pair of regulation police boots big enough for Mick (with a wink to Mick), or with his current footwear, he'll soon have horse shit between his toes.'

Mick looked down at his decimated shoes, hanging together by threads., 'But these were just getting comfortable!'

Chapter 2

7p.m. Sunday 20 January, 1788.

HMS Supply skirted a rocky headland under tow from the ship's pinnace. The helmsman took regular soundings as she glided slowly into the inlet that would later be known as "Sydney Cove". The entire roughly semi-circular shoreline was heavily wooded down to its rocky edge and bisected by a fresh-water stream that bumped and gurgled over a shingle into the harbour.

The *Supply* was the fastest ship in the First Fleet, and was the first to navigate its way up through the reaches of a vast, hitherto unknown harbour. It held a crew of 43 and 16 Royal Marines as well as the first Governor of New South Wales, Captain Arthur Phillip. The order to drop anchor and the cries of the ship's crew were the only sounds to be heard, apart from birds calling from the tree canopy. But it's likely there were human witnesses watching from the undergrowth; the Cadigal people, the land's custodians. The Cadigal's territory extended from the south side of Sydney Harbour, eastward to South Head and south for perhaps 20 kilometres. It would have been likely that the Cadigal watched the ship enter the harbour from the cliffs of South Head and followed its course every step of the way up the harbour.

The western shore of the inlet rose sharply to a headland of rugged, weather-beaten sandstone, with native trees rising through a mass of ferns. These eucalypts grew tall, with massive, irregularly shaped branches arching to the sky like arms outstretched in supplication. The Cadigal had a name for the headland; it was *Tallawolladah*, but the convicts and marines who were to make their homes there from 1788 called it *The Rocks*, in reference to its imposing sandstone ramparts.

As the Cadigal warrior-hunters silently withdrew to their camp, no doubt with stories of these mysterious white ghosts, the invaders began to make The Rocks their home.

While the Governor, soldiers' wives and other civil personnel laid claim to the eastern shore of the Tank Stream, The Rocks became the area where the first convict tents were erected, stores were unloaded and slab huts were built, creating the first delineation of Sydney real-estate based on rank and privilege; a tradition that would be faithfully observed for centuries to follow. Smoke from the first fires twisted through overhanging eucalypts, fluttering their leaves as it rose. Convicts with an eye for the main chance were already making plans for escape, and the twisting web of paths beaten down between huts would one day be the streets used by Sydney's citizenry.

The Rocks grew wild like a wayward infant left in the scrub to fend for itself. Tents would eventually be replaced by timber-slabbed huts, then wattle and daub, and later, durable yellow sandstone quarried from the cliffs of old *Tallawolladah* itself. In the years to come, people would be born, live, laugh, cry and die in The Rocks. They would build wharves, create businesses, bake bread, make iron, drink rum, love, and fight each other with equal passion.

By the time Mick and Cate stepped down from the *William Turner*, The Rocks had been heaving its sighs for over 60 years, and while it was by no means a young colt, it was a long way from being broken and tamed.

It was a melting pot of humanity. Well-to-do ladies and gentlemen walked the streets, rubbing shoulders with convict labourers, drovers, watermen, drunks and sea-captains. Carriages, carts, horses and wagons

rumbled down narrow streets peppered with potholes and flooded when Sydney brought forth one of its “southerly buster” afternoon thunderstorms. Reverends dodged pickpockets on crowded footways, and prostitutes plied their trade along the wharves on the lookout for newly arrived sailors willing to part with a few shillings for a moment’s pleasure. Bakeries wafted their scent of warm bread while drains and cesspits added their own contribution to the mix. You could describe The Rocks of 1842 with many words, but “dull” wasn’t one of them.

Although the colony was in a period of economic slowdown, it was only a brief respite in a long period of sustained growth. Sydney was the eye in a cyclone of commerce, and through her wharves ebbed and flowed a vast tide of trade. Legislation had made Britain the single market for valuable exports from Sydney, mostly wool from the sheep’s back, but illegal trade was also thriving; enterprising merchants were quick to seize opportunities in America and Asia; sandalwood and timber to China, horses to India, as well as whale oil, copper, lead and wine.

The waterfront was lined with warehouses, storing and moving goods on their relentless journey. Wharf labourers were hired off the footpath for a few days at a time, and their work was hard and dangerous. After a week or so of back-breaking labour they’d be unemployed for weeks, adding to the tide of idle men who often turned to petty theft and drunkenness.

Monday, 7 February 1842.

Cate sat on the front veranda of Dawson’s boarding house, taking in the warm morning sunshine. Mick was at work and the two boys were playing in the small front yard as she watched the passing parade going about

their business in the calm of Playfair St. She'd managed to gain employment at Dawson's. George and Emily Dawson were getting on in years, and had traded Cate's cooking and cleaning assistance for a decrease in rent, so along with Mick's job at the stables, they were getting by and putting a little money aside each week for their planned trip over the mountains.

She closed her eyes and let the sun take her mind to wherever it pleased, and she drifted back to Ireland. She was from a large family in Roscommon; the neighbouring parish to Kilcroan where Mick lived. Her father was a carpenter and her mother worked as a maid to one of the wealthy local families. Cate was the youngest in a calamitous household of four brothers and one sister. Being the youngest of the family, she was used to sticking up for herself and being heard over the clamour of her siblings. With occasional tormenting from four brothers, she learned how to take the knocks and come back with some of her own. Although her family was barely making ends meet, her childhood was a happy one. Nobody went hungry and laughter echoed through the house.

She left convent school at the age of 10, and though her girlhood was governed by the tedium of household chores, she always found time to read. An incurable romantic, she was drawn to the books printed in gold lettering and ranged along the dusty wooden shelves of her father's small but eclectic library. Exotic tales from Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe", De Cervantes' "Don Quixote" and Swift's "Gulliver's Travels" captured her young and impressionable mind. She was filled with a sense of endless wonder and adventure, longing to travel to far-off places in Egypt, Africa and Arabia. She dreamed of still, moonlit nights flying on a magic carpet, high above the domed minarets of Cairo, or sailing in a dhow toward a red sun setting over the Nile Delta.

It was a soft spring evening at the dance in St Jude's Roscommon Church Hall where she first met Mick. While Cate had been a pretty child, by the age of 23 she'd grown into a very attractive young woman who took the eye of many a young man in Roscommon. She sat on a bench with several of her friends, gossiping and giggling behind their handkerchiefs while discretely appraising the young men as they arrived. The small band in the corner of the hall had already started playing their music, and the fiddle, tin whistle, flute and pipes were in good form, playing a lively jig. A few couples had started dancing and were enjoying the music.

The young, self-conscious lads attending the dance lingered in a group near the door, telling each other lewd jokes and trying their best to look relaxed. The consumption of liquor at church functions was not condoned, but some of the boys would occasionally drift outside and take a dram from a flask produced from a coat pocket; medicinal purposes only, of course. How else would they summon the courage to ask a pretty girl to dance?

Mick was late arriving, and joined the group at the door. He knew most of the lads and quickly joined the conversation. He, like the others, occasionally glanced over at the young ladies. He'd seen Cate before of course, and although he was dazzled by her beauty, had never been able to summon the courage to approach her. She was far too beautiful for the likes of a poor lad from Kilcroan.

Cate stole a glance at the tall young man with the faraway eyes, ready smile and mop of black hair. She'd also been attracted to him for some time, and wondered if he would catch her eye, but as the night wore on, although she enjoyed more than her share of dances with the other lads, young Mick Thornton wasn't one of them.

Toward the close of the night, with Father Flannery glancing nervously at his watch, the band leader announced. 'Ladies and gentlemen, will you please take the floor for the final dance of the evening, the 'Pride of Erin.'

Cate could never be described as a patient young woman, and as the band struck up the old tune, she finally lost her patience. She rose and walked over to Mick, and with hands on her hips and a steely glint in her eye said, 'I'm Cate Connors. May I have the pleasure of this dance?'

Mick nearly keeled over in shock, went red in the face and choked on his cup of spiked punch. His slack-jawed mates gaped at each other, each hoping that Mick would somehow be struck dumb so they might be asked instead. Cate just stood there waiting, her toe tapping with impatience. Fortunately, Mick managed to mumble something about 'delighted and pleased', gently took her hand and walked onto the dance floor with his future wife.

Cate was suddenly stirred from her reverie by excited voices from inside, and gathering the children from their play, she ushered them inside. She could hear the Dawson's on the upstairs landing and made her way up the stairway to be greeted by George hurrying down the corridor. His normally placid face wore a pale look of consternation. 'We've been robbed!' he said, grasping the balustrade for support. 'Emily's jewellery's been stolen from our rooms!' 'Cate, would you be so good as to fetch the police?'

'Of course, Mr. Dawson. Would you watch the kids for me?'

Dawson nodded consent. Cate threw on her shawl and hurried down the stairs and out the front door.

Policing in the colony, particularly in The Rocks, had a chequered history. The Royal Marines, the military unit attached to the early convict settlement, refused to undertake policing duties other than night patrols, and the settlement was a wild place from the very start. Drinking large amounts of alcohol in pubs and sly grog shops was widespread, and violence on the back streets of The Rocks was commonplace.

The crime rate was on the rise, and in response to protests from the populace over declining safety, the “Sydney Foot Police” unit was formed in 1790; its recruits taken from the ranks of “better behaved” convicts. While the unit had some effect on crime rates, there were many instances of the officers themselves becoming involved in drunkenness, theft and other misdemeanours. What didn’t help much was that Police Constables were lowly paid, and incentivised to impose fines on the populace; they received fifty percent of the value of every fine.

The ordinary citizens of Sydney distrusted anyone in a position of authority, and particularly those regarded as “class-traitors”. The police, therefore, did not enjoy a great deal of support, and in some cases were faced with open hostility. During the 1840’s several violent riots broke out in central Sydney, with the populace venting their anger against the police and/or the military. In one instance in 1840, the constabulary was called to a disturbance, and under the orders of Captain Joseph Long Innes, the head of Police, they were ordered to draw their cutlasses, resulting in a number of serious injuries. A few days later the people took their revenge. While riding along Grosvenor street on his usual rounds, Captain Innes was thrown from his

horse and almost killed by a clothesline stretched taught across the street.

In the 1840s, with the cessation of convict transportation and a growing sense of a Sydney identity, the profile of the police slowly began to change. The economic downturn of the period, however, had its effect in a reduction in resources and funding, as well as a continuing struggle to raise the competency of the Sydney Foot Police.

Cate hurried along Harrington Street and up a steep rise to the police watch house at 167 Cumberland St; a low-squatting stone building. She opened the heavy timber door and stepped inside a public reception area. Small windows set high in thick walls cast a dim light onto the wooden floorboards, and behind the counter a constable leaned against a pillar. He was a short, rotund man, perhaps in his late forties, with a florid face that sported a scar along his left jawline, curving upward across his cheek as if paving a track toward his bleary eyes. His uniform was grubby and dishevelled, and he was unshaven. As Cate approached, she caught a whiff of stale rum.

‘Excuse me, Constable, I wish to report a robbery at Dawson’s Boarding House in Playfair Street.’

The constable eyed Cate up and down in appraisal for an instant, then gave her a leering grin. ‘Certainly, missus,’ he said, and opened a large journal on the counter. ‘I’m Constable Sykes. I’ll need to take down the details.’

Cate relayed the events of the morning while Sykes entered them into his journal. He placed his pen into the ink well and reached for his jacket. ‘We better take a walk down to Playfair Street and have a look, shall we?’

Sykes proffered his arm, which Cate calmly ignored, and they stepped into the street.

At the boarding house Sykes was led upstairs to the Dawson's small apartment, consisting of a bedroom and small sitting room furnished with wicker armchairs, a fireplace and a small dining table. He inspected the empty drawer in Emily Dawson's wardrobe and took down details of the missing items. He then checked the lock on the apartment door leading into the hallway and questioned the Dawson's for some time on the routine of the house and its occupants. After completing his notes, he asked George Dawson to summon Cate to the apartment.

Cate knocked at the door and Dawson ushered her into the sitting room to a wooden chair beside an open window. She felt a deep sense of foreboding.

'Mrs Thornton, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions,' he said.

Cate glanced at the Dawson's but their expressions held no clue as to the nature of the discussion. Cate nodded to Sykes without reply.

Sykes glanced down at his notebook and began, 'It seems that Mrs Dawson last saw her jewellery on Thursday evening when she replaced some items in the drawer before retiring for the night, and discovered the entire contents of the drawer were missing this morning, Monday. Can you tell me your whereabouts over that period?'

Cate shifted in her seat and cleared her throat, 'I was here at home over that time, save for my day off yesterday, Sunday, when Mick and I went to Mass with the kids, and afterwards we went for a walk around Millers Point.'

Sykes noted the points down and looked up again at Cate, 'You clean the rooms weekly, on a Friday, is that correct?'

Cate was twisting a handkerchief around her fingers tighter and tighter as Sykes locked his eyes with hers.

'Yes,' said Cate.

'And you have the only master key to the rooms, apart from Mr and Mrs Dawson?'

Cate's breathing was becoming shallow and she started to perspire despite the breeze wafting through the window. 'Yes,' she said in a voice that was becoming smaller and weaker.

Sykes wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and producing a set of manacles from his belt, thrust them in front of Cate like a weapon. 'You'll be coming back with me to Cumberland Street, my lass, and be charged with larceny under the Crimes Act.'

The Dawson's glanced at each other incredulously, and back to Sykes. 'Constable,' Exclaimed George. 'There must be some other explanation for the theft. We trust Mrs. Thornton without reservation.'

Sykes secured the manacles on Cate's wrists and screwed them tight. 'It's always the ones you trust who betray you, Mr. Dawson.' He turned to Cate and grinned with malice. 'Come now my girl, it's off to the lock-up for you.'

Cate was gripped with despair as she returned to Cumberland St with the Constable, who this time held her elbow in a tight grip, keeping her wedged between himself and the row of buildings lining the street. Although she attracted stares from onlookers, she'd wrapped her shawl over the manacles. Small comfort,

she thought, as in *The Rocks*, few secrets ever survived a sunrise, and by tomorrow word would have gotten round that Cate Thornton had been arrested.

Arrested. The word stung her like poisonous nettles. Never had anyone in her family been in trouble before, and she shuddered to think of how Mick would take the news. But she was innocent, and could not for the life of her imagine what had become of the jewellery. She had never looked into any of the drawers in any of the rooms she had worked in, but here she was, facing God knows what kind of future, separated from her family. And what of Mick and the kids? How would they cope without her? Hot tears welled in her eyes as each step took her further away from her loved ones.

That evening Mick sat dumbfounded at the kitchen table and stared at George Dawson.

‘Mick,’ George said, ‘we’re as surprised as you about all this, and we don’t believe for a minute that Cate would do such a thing. But the Constable was adamant she be taken into custody, and wouldn’t listen to us at all.’

Mick’s mind was reeling with the news and all he could think about was that his Cate was in a cold, dark cell, and the thought kicked his heart like a mule. ‘I need to go to her, George. I can’t think straight until I see her and make sure she’s alright. I’ll take her some things and try to reassure her, then I might be able to think of some way to make sense of all this.’

The two boys were in the hall doing their reading lesson with Emily, who had insisted that she look after them. They knew something was wrong; they’d seen their mother disappear out the door with Sykes. Mick went to them, knelt down and looked into their wide,

trusting eyes and he could feel the tears beginning. ‘Boys,’ he cleared his throat, ‘Mummy’s just going to be away for a little while. I’m going to see her right now so don’t worry, she’ll be home soon.’

Michael was silent but John looked up from the floor, ‘Daddy, I saw that man with Mummy. He frightened me.’

Mick stroked his hair and replied, ‘Don’t worry, matey. Daddy will look after her, and she’ll be home soon.’ Mick looked at Emily and mouthed ‘thank you’ silently to her, then headed towards the door.

He wasted no time in getting to the watch house, walking through the same door Cate had passed through just that morning, although it could have been a lifetime ago, as life for Mick had turned upside down. Sykes was at his desk, and having identified himself, Mick was checked for anything concealed, then led through to the holding cells at the back of the building.

Cate’s cell was about two meters square with a hardwood floor, stone walls and a small barred window high up in the wall. There was a rough timber bed with a straw mattress, a washbasin and a bucket in the corner for relieving herself. She sat on the edge of the bed with her head in her hands, staring at the floor. At the sound of Mick’s approach, she rushed to the bars separating her from her husband and freedom. They hugged each other as the tears flowed between them.

‘Oh, Caty girl,’ Mick sobbed. ‘I love you, and I’m going to get you out of this.’

Cate looked up into the big man’s eyes and saw the frightened child within. Her heart melted as she felt the loss and despair emanating from him. ‘I don’t know what to do, love,’ she said. ‘I’m scared and I want to go home, but I don’t know what to do.’

They held each other through the bars for a few moments, then Mick composed himself and looked into her eyes. ‘Someone took those things from the Dawson’s. Someone that got access to the room. Somehow, I’m going to find out who it was and drag his worthless arse in here to take your place.’

Mick and Cate had a few more moments together before Sykes returned. ‘Time’s up, Thornton. You have to go.’

As Mick began to turn towards Sykes, he glanced down at Cate and saw the sheer loathing on her face, and the impression that Mick had of the man on first meeting him was immediately confirmed. He kissed his wife tenderly and whispered his love, ‘Remember what I said, Caty. Trust me, we’ll get through this.’

Later that evening Cate’s mind whirled with emotion. She looked up to the small barred window and heard the babble of street sounds as life in The Rocks carried on, oblivious to her woes. She could smell the greasy fry pans and garbage cans, hear the morose barking of stray dogs, the cries of street urchins, the slurring drunks and the calls of peddlers as they all ebbed and flowed in a sea of unending life. A trickle of hope had sparked in her breast after Mick’s visit, and she’d been strengthened by his words. Never one to give in to circumstances, she was a woman who didn’t let life dictate her destiny for very long if she could get away with it. Cate had a family to look after and she could feel sorry for herself later.

The creaking of the cell’s lock brought her back to the present. She turned to see Sykes already inside the door. Cate backed away.

‘It’s a great pity that a fine beauty such as yourself should be in such a predicament, Cate,’ said Sykes with his customary leer. ‘But I could make it easier on you,

you know? Better food, a little treat here and there, a few home comforts brought to you.’ He was swaying a little and breathing heavily; stinking of rum and mutton as he licked his lips and stared at her with lust. ‘It would ease your time here before you go before the magistrate, and you know, I could even put in a good word for you.’ Sykes took a step further as he talked, closing the gap between them and devouring her with his bloodshot eyes. ‘All it would take is a little kiss and a cuddle and...’ He lunged forward to grab Cate’s shoulders.

In that instant Cate’s world slowed down as if a second was an hour. Her mind carried her back to a small field in Roscommon, bathed in spring sunshine. She was 13 and stood with her brother Patrick as he showed her how a young girl might defend her honour. She could smell the clove-scented wild orchids of the Irish heath as she heard his broad Irish brogue: ‘Caty, ya oughta kick ’em in the nuts. It’s easy and quick and it’ll disable the bastard and give you time to run.’ Cate saw Patrick’s open countenance break into a broad smile as he faded into the mist.

Caty took a half step backwards and shot the kick out at full force to connect with Sykes’ scrotum. The strike made a squelchy sound as it connected, sending the man to the floor with eyes bulging and mouthing a soundless scream as the air escaped from his lungs. He curled into a ball and groaned in pain. Cate reached down to him, grabbed his collar and dragged him across the floor, out of her cell. She lifted the keys from his belt, walked back into the cell, slammed and locked the door from the outside, throwing the keys onto the floor beside Sykes. Her eyes blazed with fury. ‘I’m going to walk free from this cell, but not this way,’ she said calmly. ‘I’m keeping this incident between you and me as our little secret, Constable, but if you dare take any reprisals against me, or try to touch me again, well, you’ve met Mick, my husband, and if he knew what you

just tried to do, he wouldn't kick you in the nuts; he'd more likely bite them off and spit them in your face.'

After Sykes had hobbled back through the door to the office, Cate was left alone in her dark cell with a single shaft of moonlight striking the timber floorboards. She shook uncontrollably for several minutes before finally calming herself with deep breaths. She'd never been in this kind of situation before. Her upbringing, although poor and without pretention, was sheltered from violence, and she'd been imbued with a strong sense of justice, her own personal dignity and the dignity of others. When faced with a palpable threat to her deeply-held values she had reacted accordingly, and she felt a sense of pride at her actions. And she was sure that if he were here, her brother Patrick would also be proud.

Chapter 3

The next morning Mick sat outside Captain Burke's office at Belmore barracks. Although it was a warm February day, he felt cold in the stone building, and longed to be with his family. He'd had a sleepless night without Cate beside him and his mind was totally preoccupied with their predicament.

As there were no other suspects in the robbery it seemed that Cate would stand before the magistrate sooner rather than later, so time was short, and he hadn't a clue where to begin. His only possible source of advice was the mounted police regiment, and after talking with Patrick O'Sullivan he was taken to see the captain.

Burke opened his office door and ushered Mick inside. They shook hands and Mick apologised for the intrusion. 'Not at all, Mick. Sergeant O'Sullivan has briefed me on the situation. I must say it's a serious charge facing your wife, and one that would carry a sentence of up to 5 years in Darlinghurst Jail if she's found guilty.'

Mick's heart sank, but he wasn't surprised by the penalty.

Burke could see the pain in Mick's face and pressed forward. 'Let me confirm what I've been told. The jewellery was taken from a locked room belonging to the owners of the establishment and only two keys were held, one by the owners themselves and one held by your wife in the course of her regular duties, correct?'

'Yes, sir.' Mick replied.

‘And the Constable attending the scene stated that the lock on the door wasn’t tampered with, and arrested your wife on the spot?’

‘Yes, that’s correct.’

‘Mick, I’m going to ask you a tough question, and please take no offence, but I must ask it anyway, if I’m going to help you. Are you absolutely certain that your wife had no part in this crime?’

Mick looked into the captain’s eyes. ‘Captain, I know my wife. She’s a religious woman, but more importantly, she’s a moral woman. And the fact that the Dawson’s have retained us in their establishment and are even looking after my children should speak for itself.’

Burke continued, ‘Thanks, Mick, I do tend to agree. So either the Dawson’s robbed themselves, or it’s a professional thief we’re looking for. I do have someone who can perhaps give you the help you need. He’s from a legal background, and I’ve known him for over 15 years. He’s a good man, sharp, resourceful, well-connected and willing to bend procedure if the cause is worthwhile. His name is Benjamin Laidlaw. He lives not far from you in Miller’s Point. Here’s his address and a letter from me.’

Mick took the papers from Burke and shook his hand again. ‘Thank you, Captain. I’m in your debt.’

Burke continued. ‘One more thing, Mick. It’s customary that when a member of the regiment or his immediate family has been formally accused of a criminal act, he must be stood down until the matter has been resolved in his favour or otherwise.’ Mick’s heart skipped a beat as he looked anxiously at Burke. ‘Accordingly, I am placing you on the unattached list forthwith, at your regular wage until further notice. And should you choose to spend your time in pursuing the

guilty party in this matter (Burke gave a wink), we would be none the wiser.'

Mick smiled at the captain. 'Yes, sir, I'll remember that.'

That afternoon Mick stood at the address in Windmill Street that Burke had given him. Of sandstone construction, the home was large by colonial standards, but rather than being imposing, it nestled into a well-tended garden with tall native ferns bathing it in cool shade. Millers Point had been a centre for whaling ships, but it was now developing into a residential area away from the ever-crowded areas of Sydney town. Mick knocked on the door.

After a few moments the door swung open to reveal a man somewhere in his mid-forties. He was perhaps 5 feet 6 inches tall, with powerful shoulders. His sandy hair was well-groomed, and his bright, alert eyes shone under dark eyebrows. His nose had at some point taken someone's right cross, perhaps more than once. His countenance told the story of one who had weathered more than one storm, and he looked like someone who could be depended on. He took in Mick's appearance at a glance. 'Afternoon to you. I'm Ben Laidlaw. How can I help you?'

Mick introduced himself and his connection to Matthew Burke, and handed him Burke's letter.

'Come in, Mick. I was just making a pot of brew. Would you care for a cup?' Laidlaw showed him to a sitting room and busied himself in the kitchen.

After the tea was poured Laidlaw sat back in his armchair and read Burke's letter. 'You have a worthy friend in Matthew Burke; he and I go back a few years. If he recommends you to me, I trust his judgement and I'm glad to help.'

Mick replied, ‘Thank you, Mr Laidlaw...’

Ben held up a hand. ‘Call me Ben.’

Mick nodded assent.

Laidlaw then asked Mick to tell the story of Cate’s arrest in his own words, and listened intently until he was finished. ‘Thanks, Mick. As I see it, we have two tasks. The first is to slow down the process of arraignment, and your wife’s appearance at court. That will grant us some time. The second is to find the person responsible for the theft; that may take a while, depending on our luck. I can think of a couple of light-fingered lads with form in this area, but I’ll need to pay a visit to your boarding house first. I’ll need your help too, Mick, the two of us can cover more ground, and you can put those police-issue boots to good use.’

Mick laughed, ‘You can bank on that. I must tell you though, I don’t have much money, but whatever I have is yours if it will bring Caty back home to us.’

Ben replied, ‘Hang onto your money, Mick. I was getting bored doing nothing but having cups of tea.’

The next morning, Wednesday 9 February, Laidlaw made his way across town to the district courthouse. An onlooker glancing his way would have seen a man with a purposeful stride and erect bearing, well-dressed and with a look of ease about him.

Laidlaw was born in 1797, the son of a London barrister from a well-to-do family. His schooling led him to Cambridge University where he followed in his father’s footsteps and qualified as a barrister in 1819. Ben was something of a rebel, however, not content with following the rituals and mores of London’s upper class. He was a born adventurer and risk-taker, and was

more interested in obscure and difficult cases. He often found himself representing clients who were rejected by other lawyers, and some who were in need of help but without the means to pay for it. His penchant for the unusual led him into the murky underbelly of Victorian London where its inhabitants moved in deep shadow with fast blades and animal cunning. It was there that he had his nose re-arranged and learned to defend himself. In that neighbourhood, it was wise to step lightly and watch your back.

In 1825 at the age of 28, Ben suddenly left London on a ship bound for Cape Town. Rumour had it that he'd made enemies in the corridors of power at Westminster and was under threat of death over information he'd stumbled upon; something to do with the disappearance of a well-known prostitute, so he made himself disappear. After Cape Town he journeyed to Bombay and Calcutta, then Ceylon, Batavia and the East Indies, finally sailing into Sydney Harbour in 1830 where he began to practice law again.

His penchant for the unusual had ignited an interest in the investigative aspects of crime. He developed his own set of practices based on his "schooling" in London's underworld, which, combined with his knowledge of the law, made his reputation as not just a brilliant lawyer but someone who could unravel a crime and determine the truth to the benefit of his clients.

His trip to the courthouse was short but fruitful. The senior Clerk of Records owed him a favour and assured Ben he would shuffle the papers and delay Cate's trial for as long as he could, but there was no guarantee how long. After finalising the details, in which he made it known that he would be representing Cate in court, he headed for The Rocks and Dawson's Boarding House.

On his arrival at Dawson's he found Mick sweeping out the downstairs sitting room; he'd taken on some of Cate's duties as a way of thanking George and Emily for their kindness. Mick introduced Ben to the couple and Ben explained his role in the situation.

'I'm grateful to you, Ben, I've heard of your work in court and your reputation for taking cases that most barristers would not. Hopefully you can get Cate released as well as find our stolen property,' said George.

'I'll do my best, Mr. Dawson. If you don't mind, may I see your Guest Register?'

'Of course, follow me.'

Dawson led Ben to a leather-bound journal in which was recorded all arrivals and departures. He began to leaf through the book. His keen eyes darted back and forth, up and down as his hands continuously swept the pages, forwards and backwards in rapid succession. Occasionally he would stop, inspect an entry closely and jot down details in a notebook. After some time, he made a few final notes and found the others at the kitchen table.

'Any luck?' asked Mick as the others looked up from their tea.

'Well, I've seen one name that matches a known thief in the area. It's unlikely though that our man would use his real name, but who knows, most crims aren't particularly smart. I also recognised the handwriting of another two guests that I'd like to match against court papers of previous offenders. It's something to start with at least.'

'I don't understand though, Ben,' replied Mick. 'If there were only two keys, which were both accounted

for, and there was no forced entry, how would he gain access to the room?’

‘Two possibilities, Mick,’ answered Ben. ‘One, that the door to George’s room was inadvertently left unlocked and our man just got lucky, which is unlikely, or that he had a duplicate key. It’s a fairly simple process for an experienced thief to make an impression of a key, using a piece of bread dough for example; forcing the key into the dough so it forms the exact shape. It’s then only a matter of finding a blacksmith who asks no questions, to make a duplicate.’ He looked at Emily. ‘Mrs. Dawson, you were cleaning the rooms before Cate came along, I understand?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ answered Emily.

‘When you used the key to open a room, did you leave it in the lock?’

Emily looked a little sheepish. ‘Yes, otherwise it’s too easy to mix up the keys when you’re going from room to room.’

‘And I’m assuming you would have suggested that Cate use the same process.’ Emily nodded silently in assent. ‘So, my thought is that on that Friday the thief waited for Cate to enter your rooms for her cleaning duties, then removed the key from the lock and made the imprint. Having returned the key to the lock, he had the duplicate made, then waited for an opportunity to gain access. Tell me, do you and George have any regular commitments that take you away from the house on a weekend?’

The Dawson’s looked at each other, and George replied, ‘Yes, on Sundays we attend evening church services.’

‘Then that would have given him time to have the duplicate made and enter your rooms, find the jewellery

and make off with it.’ The three looked at each other in mute recognition.

‘I’d like to spend a little time with you both to discuss some of your guests, and Mick, I also have some things you can help with.’

After Ben had concluded with the Dawson’s he and Mick talked quietly on the front veranda where afternoon sun cast long shadows across The Rocks. In the street, dock workers, shop assistants, stable hands and washerwomen wended their way home from a hard day’s work. Stray dogs ambled along the edges of the dusty road, while traffic moved back and forth in a choreographed ballet of city life. As the shadows lengthened, Mick and Ben discussed next moves. Ben would follow the leads he’d gained from the Dawson’s, and Mick was to do the rounds of pawnshops with a description of Emily’s jewellery. Ben gave Mick the names and descriptions of a couple of known crims in the area, and he was to discretely try to uncover any trace of them.

‘Be very careful though, Mick,’ Ben had said. ‘Don’t throw these names about carelessly. News travels fast here, especially in the underground network, and you could be targeted.’

For the next few days Mick divided his time between trawling the streets of Sydney in search of pawnbrokers, helping with the housework at Dawson’s and being with his two boys, as well as his twice-daily visits to see Cate in the watch house. He’d kept her up-to-date with news of Ben’s involvement and progress being made. He also brought her food from Emily’s kitchen plus extra clothing and other essentials. He was expecting a degree of resistance or even refusal from Sykes to allow these items into her cell, but he appeared

to ignore the visits, and turned a blind eye. When Mick mentioned this to Cate, she only shrugged and said, 'The constable hasn't got the balls for an argument.'

Cate remained her quiet, determined self. She missed the kids desperately but would not let Mick to tell them where she was, or bring them to visit. 'God knows there're enough convicts in this town already without them seeing their mum behind bars,' Cate had said, so Mick maintained the pretence that their mother was just away for a while and would be back soon.

It was Monday evening, 14 February 1842, when Mick walked into the Fortune of War Hotel in The Rocks after another day of searching for leads. "The Fortune" was already busy with dockworkers drinking at the bar and dissecting the never-ending gossip. Mick was footsore and thirsty. He bought a beer and searched for a seat when he spied Henry Maguire signalling to him from a corner table. Henry worked on the wharves and was a regular at the Fortune; Mick had gotten to know him from his occasional visits to the pub on his way home from work.

Mick walked over. 'Hello, Henry.'

'G'Day, Mick.'

The two men each took a pull of their beer. 'How's Cate doing?' Henry knew of Cate's situation.

'She's a strong woman, Henry' replied Mick. 'I don't know how she can stand it in that cell; it's been a week now, but we'll get her out of this.'

Henry nodded. 'Mick, you know how people talk around here. Most of 'em don't mean any harm, but there are some who think you're too chummy with the coppers, and they've got nasty tongues. Don't let 'em get you down.' As he spoke, Henry glanced over at the bar at a group of three men deep in conversation.

Mick followed his line of sight. ‘You mean those three? They’re just wharf rats who’ve got nothing better to do with their time.’

It was Mick’s turn to shout and he moved to the bar. As he waited his turn, he was within hearing distance from the three watermen Henry had pointed out, and suddenly one of them uttered Mick’s name in conversation. He ignored it and kept his eyes on the barman. Then he heard Cate’s name, this time a little louder than the rest of the talk, followed by laughter, and knew he was being baited. He paid for the beers, then paused and thought to himself, ‘*Alright, time to sort these buggers out.*’ He turned to face the three, and their conversation suddenly dropped away. ‘If you fellas have something to say about me and my family, the least you could do is say it to my face.’

The middle man, heavily built and a little shorter than Mick, replied with a mocking smile, ‘Now, why would we be talking about a close mate of the coppers when there’s so many more interesting things to discuss?’

Mick wasn’t about to be conned into starting a fight, at least not against three men, but he wasn’t going to back down either. He replied, ‘Mate, I just work with their horses, most of which smell better and probably have more intelligence than yourself, and I’m betting you probably dish out more shit with your mouth than I do with a shovel.’ As Mick turned away to reach for his drinks, a heavy hand clapped down hard on his shoulder and swung him round.

Mick knew what was coming and was already ducking under the man’s haymaker punch that just grazed the back of his head, and then in a split-second he put his entire body weight behind a driving blow to the man’s ample midsection, knocking the wind from his lungs as his legs buckled and he hit the floor with a

thud, gasping for breath. Mick's eyes were already locked on the other two and he said evenly, 'You fellas want to try your luck too?' But they were in no mood to join their mate on the floor. Mick picked up his glass, drained it, then walked out the side door and headed home.

Another two long days passed without any word from Ben or news on Cate's trial date. Mick was disheartened by the lack of progress but refused to give in to self-pity. He continued to help around the house at the Dawson's, and had taken over Cate's role as a schoolteacher for the two boys, who had both become more subdued, no doubt as a result of the separation from their mother.

Mick puffed on his pipe as he sat at the kitchen table with sunlight beaming through the window, and his mind wandered back to life on his Galway farm. The small five-acre plot was part of a once-large estate that had been broken up into smaller holdings and leased to tenant farmers. His family had worked the same parcel of land for three generations; the Thornton family took up an entire corner of the Catholic Cemetery at St. Mary's Church, just down the road. He ran a few head of cattle, a couple of horses, had a clutch of chickens and grew vegetables. The family was able to make some money at the village markets or from the occasional sale of calves, but with rent and taxes paid to the Church of Ireland Clergy, there was precious little left over. Mick was born a farmer, and he longed for the smell of green grass on the breeze after a shower of rain. This town of Sydney with its smoke, soot, vermin and vagabonds was a long way from the rolling green hills of Galway, and city life was beginning to lose the appeal of that morning, seemingly a lifetime ago, when he stood on the deck of the *William Turner* at Circular Quay.

But there was no turning back for him, and he was more determined than ever to cross those Blue Mountains he'd heard so much about. He cherished a vision for himself and his family where they lived under a wide, sun-filled sky and worked rich brown land that was theirs, and no one could confiscate it, as Cromwell and the English kings had done to the Irish for the last two hundred years. He would build a homestead on top of a hill with a big fireplace and a veranda around the outside where he would sit at the end of the day and watch the sunset. His boys would grow up to be strong men with families of their own, and he and Cate would spend the rest of their lives together, content in their old age. It was a vision that he held onto when the world turned sour, just as it had done since Cate had gone.

A knock on the front door woke him from his thoughts. He opened it to a young boy holding an envelope in two grubby hands. 'Got a message for Mick Thornton from Mister Laidlaw,' he said.

'I'm Mick,' he replied, whereupon the urchin thrust the envelope into Mick's hand and sauntered out the front gate. George Dawson had joined Mick at the door, and Mick quickly opened the note and read Ben's cursive hand. *'Dear Mick, Cate's trial is set for 24 February at 2 p.m. I have progress on the robbery. Can you come to my house as soon as possible?'* Mick passed the note to George, grabbed his coat and made for the front gate.

Ben and Mick sat in Laidlaw's kitchen over the customary pot of tea. 'The trial is eight days away Mick, so we don't have much time. However, we have some developments. I borrowed the Dawson's guest register and compared guests' handwriting to police records on prior cases. Although one guest registered as a "Charles Thomson", his handwriting is an exact match for a well-known thief by the name of John Booth. I know of Booth. He's a second-generation criminal. His father

was transported for theft in 1805 and it looks like he taught young John everything he knew.'

'I see,' said Mick. 'But how do you know he's the one who stole the jewellery?'

'I have a description of Booth from the police, and Emily Dawson has told me the gentleman she knew as Charles Thomson fits Booth's description; complete with a pronounced limp from a malformed leg. To top it off, he checked into the boarding house on the 31 of January and checked out on Monday, February 7, the day that the theft was discovered.' said Ben. 'I believe he's our man.'

'I arranged to have Emily Dawson's jewellery valued, based on her description of the stolen pieces. The haul is very valuable, close to a hundred pounds,' said Ben. 'Mick, I need you to revisit the pawn shops with the description of Booth. That might jog some memories. You might also mention that the police are interested in tracing these valuables as well.'

Mick glanced up from his tea with a look of surprise. 'Are they?'

Ben replied, 'Booth is a suspect in at least two other robberies in The Rocks. The police are getting pressure from the big end of town to do something. When I add this crime to the list, with a positive description of Booth, I think they'll get off their arses and take some action.'

Six days later, on Tuesday night 22 February about a kilometre away from Laidlaw's cottage in Millers Point, John Booth stowed the last of his belongings into a canvas kit bag, secured the rope tightly and slung it over his shoulder. He was in an upstairs room of his old man's dimly lit sly grog shop in Clarence Lane, tucked

in behind Kent Street and away from prying eyes. He was in good spirits; he'd come away from the Dawson job with a good haul that would set him up for quite a long time. Things were getting hot in Sydney though. Word on the street said the coppers were getting restless, but he was in the clear. He chuckled to himself about the maid being arrested and scheduled for court in a couple of days' time; she'd do time in Darlo Jail while he lived high on the hog. He'd bought passage to Melbourne by steamer, leaving on the tide that night at 10.30 p.m. He checked his fob watch. It was 9 o'clock. He carefully parted the lace curtains and peered into the lane below. There was a fine, misty rain falling that reflected in the street lamp's yellow glow like gossamer threads. A foghorn sounded forlornly from the harbour, answered by the lonely bark of a neighbourhood dog. He checked for any movement in the shadows, but there was nothing. The lane was deserted. It was time to go.

Silently Booth opened the front door, peered through the crack and checked the lane once more before stepping out silently and heading toward Clarence Street. The damp, swirling rain enveloped him as he hugged the dark shadows. Then suddenly, two silent figures emerged from a laneway and followed him. Sykes was as tense as a cat; the footsteps behind him matched his own cadence; they were keeping pace with him. He quickened his own step, and when they matched his pace again, he broke into a run.

The two pursuers followed closely behind, their boots splashing through rain puddles. For a man with a defective leg, Booth moved fast, but the bag over his shoulder was like a lead weight and his pursuers began to gain ground. As he neared the end of the lane, without warning two more figures emerged from the dark directly ahead of him.

‘Stop! Police!’ came the warning, and as Booth reached for the pistol concealed inside his coat, a shot rang out like a whip crack and he fell to the ground.

Booth writhed in pain from a wound to the shoulder as his pursuers reached him. One was a policeman with sergeant stripes, the other a civilian.

The sergeant bent down and spoke, ‘John Booth, you are hereby placed under arrest for robbery.’

Beside the Sergeant, Ben Laidlaw looked down into Booth’s eyes, and his face broke into a grim smile.

A full moon hung in the night sky, bathing Windmill Street in a soft glow that diffused through the windows and reflected in the silverware. Ben Laidlaw stood at the table’s head, expertly uncorking a bottle of wine, and filled his guests’ glasses. Mick Thornton sat with one arm slung over the back of his chair, his eyes focussed on Cate sitting opposite as she shared a joke across the table with Emily and George Dawson.

She had worn her best dress for the occasion, and with her hair worn up, exposing her slender neck, Mick had never seen her so beautiful.

Mick took a sip from his glass, ‘Ben, I’ve been wondering why a London barrister finds himself at the other end of the earth, chasing villains down dark alleys in the backstreets of Sydney.’

The table was silent for a moment as the others looked Ben’s way. He grinned. ‘A fair question, Mick. There’s no dark secret. I followed my father into law, mostly because it was expected of me, but after a while I became bored. Having handled a number of criminal cases, I became interested in investigative techniques. I’d seen quite a number of murders and thefts that were

either unsolved or had been wound up with a quick arrest on flimsy evidence, similar to our constable Sykes. So, I began to represent clients that needed more than just legal expertise.'

'You see, I believe that in the future, as science develops, we'll find ways of examining crime scenes that reveal the criminal quicker and with more certainty.' He held his glass by the stem and lifted it to the candlelight. 'For instance, look at this glass. You can see the marks left by my fingers. My theory is that these are unique to an individual, and if we can develop a way to record them, we can identify which individual held this glass or lifted a window or held a pistol. A powerful piece of evidence in solving a crime. So, instead of chasing John Booth down an alleyway, I could catch him by his fingers.' He chuckled. 'As for my presence here in Sydney, well, let's just say that sometimes it's possible to know too much.'

'Well, I'm just glad that you caught Booth, and hopefully he'll not bring grief to anyone for a few years at least,' said Cate.

Ben lifted his glass and spoke, 'Ladies and gentlemen, here's to Cate Thornton's safe return to her family.'

They raised their glasses and drank the toast, and George spoke. 'Ben, you've been very secretive about the details of Booth's capture. I assume that tonight you'll put us out of our misery?'

Ben sat back in his chair. 'Firstly, thank you all for being here for what I trust will be an enjoyable celebration. Yes, George, before dinner is served, I think we should put matters to rest, and conclude the chapter of the robbery from the Dawson's Boarding House.'

‘I knew the police had two other unsolved robberies on their books, and the odd thing was they both bore the hallmarks of John Booth, yet Booth remained at large and apparently free to pursue his career. To me it smelt a little like three-day-old fish; something was rotten. Through a senior contact I was given access to police records on these robberies and I noted a consistency that piqued my interest. It occurred to me that someone inside the force was helping Booth, heading others off the scent, probably for a cut in the proceeds. I was able to convince the police upper echelons they needed to bring in a senior officer from outside who was trustworthy enough to unearth evidence on Booth and locate his whereabouts. That was the officer I was with that night outside the grog shop in Clarence Lane.’

‘And what was the key to all this? Who was keeping Booth from capture?’ asked Mick.

Laidlaw glanced around the group, relishing the suspense, ‘The person who was responsible was one constable Bernard Sykes of the Cumberland St Watch House.’

Cate’s jaw dropped as she stared at Ben. Mick slumped back in his chair and took a gulp of wine and George and Emily stared at each other in silence.

He continued. ‘My suspicions were raised when I learned that Sykes was the attending constable in each of the three robberies, so I dug into the police reports. In the first two robberies he falsified statements to hide Booth’s identity. He also managed to cast some doubt on the credibility of victims of the crimes themselves. And in Cate’s case, he made a hasty arrest because he knew she had no alibi, putting Booth in the clear once more.’

Cate turned her gaze down to the tabletop for a couple of moments, and when she looked up again, her eyes held a mist of tears glistening in the candlelight.

Mick spoke again, 'But if Booth's old man had a place close by in Clarence Lane, why didn't the police make a visit in search of Booth?'

'They did, twice,' answered Ben. 'The raids were conducted by Sykes, who needless to say, tipped Booth off in advance.'

George spoke. 'And what's become of our constable friend?'

Ben replied with a sardonic grin. 'Sykes will face charges of perjury and perverting the course of justice, and will no doubt end up as a guest of Her Majesty at Darlinghurst Jail. But for the moment he's in custody at the Cumberland St Watch House.'

The room was silent for a moment as Cate spoke. 'Ben, you and Mick have worked so hard, day and night to keep me from prison. Mick didn't give up on his investigation of the pawnbrokers, and came up with one of Emily's pearl earrings as evidence that will put Booth away. He cared for our children and shielded them from this whole mess. That's why I love him. Ben, you used your sharp mind and street-savvy to out-think a couple of leeches who won't be around to bother anyone for a long time, and you returned Emily's jewellery to her. George and Emily, you believed in me and stood by me when most would not. You cared for my children, and I will be forever in your debt. To each of you, Mick and I owe a debt of gratitude that we can never adequately repay. My one regret is that I only kicked Sykes in the balls once.'

