

Song From the Heart -Extract ...

(Chapter 1 - pages 11-15)

Boolai

South-east Queensland

October 1882

Ted had risen early. Somehow, caught in that vague interval between wakefulness and sleep, Kitty sensed his first stirrings, the stretch of his legs and a sudden shift of equilibrium as he left the bed. She heard him padding around the room, heard sounds of dressing, the soft rustle of a clean shirt, the snap of the belt buckle. Then he was gone, his departure confirmed by the creak of the front door of the hut. Fitfully she dozed again, lulled back into that grey expanse from which no dreams came.

The chatter of birds eventually roused her. Puzzled, she opened one sleepy eye and blinked, not knowing for a moment where she was. The room was strange, yet familiar, and certainly not her own. Around her lay an enveloping whiteness; walls, curtains, even the coverlet on the bed. Crisp fabric billowed inwards from the window, buffeted into full sails by the morning breeze. Sunshine filtered through, adding a brilliance to the room.

On the side table she caught a glimpse of the remnants of a bunch of flowers. Her wedding bouquet, she remembered with a sudden jolt. *Celsiana* roses, past their prime, the creamy petals curling already with the heat. Someone had put the posy in a vase. It must have been Ted. Ted who had been married to Maddie, Kitty's sister. But Maddie was dead, and her husband was now Kitty's own.

Fully awake now and propped on one elbow, she saw the indentation on the pillow. She moved her hand, touching the place where his head had lain, and light reflected dully back. Glancing down, she studied the ring, brand new, a plain rose-gold band that circled her marriage finger. Already the wedding seemed far away, a faint blur in her mind.

It seemed strange that she was married, as though almost in the blink of an eyelid she had been transformed into someone who was not herself. At this precise moment yesterday she had been Miss Kitty. Today she was Mrs Katherine Hall.

A new name and a different bed. Kitty sighed and let her head fall back against the pillow. Lying in that white room, dazzled by the sunlight, she had a sense of teetering on the edge of something vague. How did it feel, being married? She shook her head, not knowing. However, she thought with a grimace as the first wave of nausea for the morning snaked through her belly, she knew what it was like to be pregnant. Fighting back the urge to retch, she took a deep breath and relaxed, counting to ten, and felt the need subside.

Unwillingly her thoughts drifted back to that night, almost two months earlier. She had been sitting on a bale of hay, watching over the calving cow, when Ted had stumbled into the stable. Under his arm were tucked two bottles of ale. He was merry

and full of good humour, having just returned from the races in Brisbane. His mood was infectious and, after much prompting, Kitty had accepted his offer of a drink.

They had made small talk at first, touching on nothing personal. Ted seemed to be constantly refilling her glass. One, two. Kitty soon lost count of the drinks she had consumed and the stable walls became decidedly indistinct and fuzzy. It was warm in there, and the air filled with the faint cloying odour of chaff and molasses. After a while, Ted was silent and nothing moved except for the rhythmic rise and fall of the cow's flank.

Even now she was unsure how the chain of events had unfolded, yet small details remained vivid in her mind. Ted fumbling at her buttons, the searing sensation of his hand brushing against her cheek. Ted's body, mouth and skin all moulded to her own.

In hindsight, she knew she should have stopped him, gathered what remained of her dignity and walked away. Should have walked across the paddocks to Dan, who loved her and wanted her for his wife. But foolishly she had stayed, betraying him, betraying their love, and now Dan was gone.

One brief regrettable mistake and she was saddled with the certainty of an unplanned baby and a loveless marriage. What had Ted said the previous night, after the wedding? *I've married you to allow our child to escape the tag of bastardry. I'll look after you and do everything in my power to make you happy. But I can't promise...*

To love you: those had been the words he was unable to say.

'It's not fair,' she whispered suddenly, her voice sounding loud against the stillness of the hut. Yet she knew it was pointless to harbour bitter thoughts against things that could not be changed. There could be no going back, though she had wished long and hard that she might have been able to.

Reluctantly Kitty tried to focus on the future. Besides the eventuality, in approximately seven months time, of the birth of her first child, there were Ted's children to be considered. Emma, only nine years old, was still bewildered by her mother's recent death. And Beth, now thirteen, closeted away in Beenleigh at the convent: she had yet to be informed of her father's hasty remarriage.

'She will have to be told,' Kitty said firmly to herself. 'And the sooner the better. I'll write this afternoon.'

Swinging herself from the bed, Kitty padded through the silent hut. Passing the mirror hanging over the sideboard in the dining room, she stopped and stared at her reflection. A mass of red-gold hair, not yet tied up for the day, cascaded over her shoulders and down her back. Her eyes, green and flecked with brown, seemed large and luminous, reflecting the fact that she had had little sleep the night before.

'Goodness,' she reprimanded, impatiently pinching her cheeks, trying to add some colour to her otherwise pale face. 'You look like something the cat dragged in.'

She found Emma in the lean-to kitchen eating toast mounded high with the remnants of a jar of marmalade.

'I saw you,' the child said gravely as she licked a smear of the preserve from her top lip, 'asleep in Mama's bed.'

'Yes,' replied Kitty as she tousled her small niece's blond hair. 'We were married yesterday, your Papa and I. Remember how Reverend Carey came, then we had the lovely sandwiches afterwards, and the little cakes?'

Emma sat for a moment, contemplating Kitty's words. Her face, round and dimpled, held a look of such sadness that Kitty wondered if the child was about to cry. Then, wide-eyed: 'Does that mean you're my mama now?'

Kitty shook her head.

'That's alright then,' replied Emma, brightening. 'Because I already have a mother, even though she's dead. And you can't have two mothers, can you?'

At the simplicity of the words, Kitty felt a sudden massing of tears sting her eyes. 'No, darling.' Then, forcing a smile to her face, she added: 'I'm really your step-mama. You know, like the wicked step-mother in Snow White.' She walked towards Emma, taking exaggerated menacing steps, hands above her head, growling menacingly.

Emma gave a mock shriek and ducked sideways. 'A wicked step-mama? Wait till I tell Beth.'

As Kitty sipped her tea, she pondered on her new relationship to Beth and Emma. As her sister's offspring, they had been her nieces. Now, with her marriage the previous day to their father, they had suddenly become her step-children. And the new baby? Both cousin and half-brother. Or half-sister, she hurriedly assured herself. There were no guarantees that this child would be a son.

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