

CHAPTER 1

Marigold
1898

‘Hooshta! Hooshta!’

The camels lowered their huge heads and glowered, casting about before dropping slowly to their knees in the hot sand, waiting patiently for their cameleers to pack them again. Shovels, chairs, kerosine tins for lamps and small boxes of medicine were piled beside crates of champagne, boxes of cheap cotton and leather-bound books ordered from London, waiting patiently for invitations into their new homes in the desert. The stink of the animals blanketed the siding, and as Marigold Harrington climbed down from the train, she held a hand to her mouth.

Around her was the comfortable chaos of new arrivals in a sea of sand and flies.

‘Excuse me,’ she said to the small man nearest to her as he spat on the ground in frustration. ‘Are these your camels?’

The cameleer looked confused. ‘Mine. Yes, mine.’

‘And you carry things all over the desert?’

‘Yes. Of course.’ He patted a small table strapped to the animal he’d been arguing with, and red dust exploded into the hot air as the camel sighed. ‘They carry goods for many miles.’ He glanced across

the street to where a butcher was loading sides of beef onto his cart while his horses danced uneasily in harness. ‘Better than those nags. Too thirsty. No patience.’ He rubbed the ear of his friend, which blinked its long eyelashes slowly. ‘My camels will cross the desert long before those horses have died and turned to soup!’

‘Do you think a camel could take me north – to my father? It might be a long way.’

‘A camel can do whatever I tell him to, but young ladies shouldn’t go north. They should stay here in Coolgardie. Young ladies don’t *like* north.’

‘Oh, I think I can decide what I like, Mr . . .?’

‘Mahmood,’ he told her. ‘I am Mahmood.’

‘I’m pleased to meet you, Mr Mahmood. I hope that your camels are as strong as they look.’

‘They’re strong enough,’ Mahmood assured her.

‘Marigold!’ A stout woman wearing a broad hat, her bodice struggling in the heat of the afternoon, had stepped onto the platform. ‘There you are.’

Marigold waited for her mother to join her, smoothing down her skirts crumpled from hours aboard the train from Perth.

Mrs Harrington glanced uneasily at the camels. ‘Do you think the buggy to Kalgoorlie will leave directly?’ she asked. ‘I might just sit here in the shade. I’m not about to wander around in the dirt waiting for transportation in this godforsaken place.’

Marigold sighed. ‘If it’s godforsaken here, then we will certainly be busy,’ she replied. ‘And I imagine we’ll be covered in dust before sundown, so it hardly makes any difference.’

‘Marigold. We will still live by acceptable standards,’ her mother told her. ‘I have no intention of letting things go out here in the back of beyond. We’ll make our investments and holiday at Fremantle by January.’

January seemed a long time away.

‘Yes, Mother.’ Marigold nodded. ‘But I think we can be useful to the unfortunate whilst we’re here.’

‘Well, we won’t do that by striking out into the unknown. You heard what happened to that poor Scottish woman who came to find her son . . .’

‘Yes, Mother.’

Her mother sniffed disapprovingly. ‘Dead. That’s what. Had a blast of the Australian sun and lay down by the side of the road and *died*.’ She adjusted her hat against the furious heat. ‘So don’t think that couldn’t happen to *you*.’

A camel bellowed and Marigold startled. ‘I think my new camel friend would be willing to take me.’

Mrs Harrington snorted. ‘I think your new friend should remember his place.’

Mahmood gave his camel a friendly slap on the flank and the huge animal pressed his nose into his chest.

‘Goodbye, Mr Mahmood,’ Marigold said. ‘I’m certain our paths will cross again.’

‘Inshallah.’ Mahmood bowed, then began to turn his lugubrious train of camels in the red earth, heading north along the sandy track to Menzies, a chorus of crows crying into the warm sky marking his departure.

Marigold scanned the thinning crowd slowly moving away from Coolgardie station, hoping she’d see her father marching towards them with his arms outstretched in greeting. This was his adventure, and they were following him out of loyalty alone. It had pained them both to leave behind their lives in Melbourne, and Marigold feared the miles of untamed bush would swallow her father without a trace.

At home he’d been a senior member of their parish church, and speaking for the Lord had brought him status and spiritual rewards.

But then there'd been a new fever and he'd become obsessed with gold; had bought every paper with tales of the gold rush in Western Australia, had read all the articles aloud at least twice. He'd taken to pointing to a map of the country. *It's not so far*, he would say. *It's a boat ride and a few days on horseback, that's all.* The idea of gold had seduced him almost as much as the pearly gates above, and he'd boarded a ship in Melbourne bound for Albany amid a flurry of prayers and promises that they would see him again soon, that their fortunes would be assured, that they would be able to spend the rest of their lives doing good works and living in Hawthorn, just down the street from the governor's son and his beautiful wife.

Marigold and Evelyn had waved him off, weeping and mystified, wanting to support his passionate endeavour but unable to share his lust for gold. For months they lived in Melbourne on their meagre savings, and some months when money would be received in the post they would carefully store it away for the anticipated day when the worst happened and they'd hear from him no more. And then the telegram had arrived from Kalgoorlie. Herbert had found gold and they were to join him to start a new life.

The sulky, when it arrived to collect them from the train, took two hours to reach Kalgoorlie, the well-worn track carved into divots, into which the large wheels dropped, jolting them in their seats. Marigold gazed out into the bush as galahs shrieked at their progress, fluttering from tree to tree in search of a shadier spot.

'Do you think Father will have come to Kalgoorlie to greet us?' she asked.

Her mother watched the road ahead. 'I don't suppose so,' she said. 'He's a busy man, and if he's still working to the north, it's likely he won't have time.'

'Do you think he's found our fortune?' Marigold asked.

‘Don’t concern me with silly questions. We will see what’s what upon our arrival. I’m told it may be quite difficult, but we are up to the task.’

‘I know there will be many poor women who will be glad of our help. Mrs Beadle says there is much work to be done.’

‘Mrs Beadle! I swear you think more of her than you do of me. See this as an opportunity for a new start, dear. New *friendships*. We needn’t save the world.’

‘I understand that, Mother, but I so wish to help the less fortunate.’

‘Very admirable, I’m sure. But try to associate with nice young ladies, won’t you. They may have brothers – and you won’t find yourself a suitable husband with talk of women’s rights!’

‘Won’t I? Perhaps I’ll find myself a nice husband who cares about the dignity of our sex.’

‘Ha! No man cares for our sex beyond a decent meal on the table and a good Christian woman in the kitchen.’

‘Amen!’ the driver responded. The sulky shuddered through another pothole and Marigold fell silent as the ancient dust billowed around them like angry ghosts and the low sun lit up the salmon gums like cathedral windows.

The streets of Kalgoorlie were a welcome relief to Marigold and her mother after the long day of travel. Marigold turned in her seat to take in the broad Hannan Street as they drove along it, past small stores selling racks of shoes; Hicks, Hunter and Company, with their apparel and furniture for new arrivals; Gaze’s Boots Bazaar, which, she noted, had a display of ‘hygienic underclothing’; and Moher and Smith, a butcher’s shop worthy of a Melbourne street, displaying beef, mutton, duck, chicken and suckling pig for the bustling crowds.

‘Well!’ Evelyn Harrington exclaimed. ‘I must say, Kalgoorlie is a town of great industry. Driver, where might we purchase items for our household?’

The sulky paused as they waited for a camel train to turn in front of them.

‘Yer’d be best to go to Firmister’s,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘They sell all the makings for a home there – kerosene heaters, lamps, glassware, fans, ice chests. All that sort of thing. What they don’t stock they’ll order in from Perth and you’ll have it in a week or so.’

‘That sounds most satisfactory.’ Marigold’s mother settled back in her seat and patted her daughter on the hand, an unexpected display of optimism.

A few minutes later the driver guided the sulky to the side of the road. ‘Here we are, ladies.’ The horses stopped gratefully, their heads low. The light was fading in Hannan Street, but men were moving up and down, gathering in groups to share their news and seek out the comforts of the town. Marigold watched them, fascinated. They seemed wilder than the men she knew, as if, though they knew how to dress and shave, their moustaches groomed by barbers, their trousers patched by busy seamstresses, there was something untamed in their movement. She saw the tiredness in their backs, their weary rolling gaits, but in the gathering twilight they seemed free somehow, as if they knew that these streets, and the treasures beyond, were theirs to discover. These were men who yearned for adventure, men for whom home was a distant memory.

The doors of the hotels were open to the evening air. Marigold and her mother had pulled up outside the York Hotel and Marigold fumbled quickly through her purse to find a couple of shillings for the driver.

‘I’d really prefer we were accommodated in a boarding house,’ Mrs Harrington said, gazing up at the hotel, which was filled with

men's voices and stank of sweat and whisky. 'I don't think I wish to be in such rough company.'

'I'll look for a boarding house tomorrow, Mother. Mrs Beadle recommended the hotel. She said the rooms are more than adequate.' Marigold steeled herself for further remonstrance. Mrs Beadle was not a woman concerned with niceties and class; it was her business to deal in practicalities. The conditions of the working woman, the safety of her home, and the wages of labourers were worth far more to Mrs Beadle than the quality of a mattress or the propriety of an establishment.

'They can be a little rough,' the driver told her, 'but never you mind, you'll be pretty safe. There's enough of them with Christian mothers that you'll be able to sleep safe in your beds. I heard a barmaid had an unwanted visitor to her room not so long ago, and he was dragged out and beaten black and blue. Someone had to step in to save his neck.'

Mrs Harrington gasped. 'I must say, I'm not entirely certain that's any comfort!'

She climbed down from the sulky, taking Marigold's hand. 'I thank you for your service and your advice,' she told the driver.

He jumped down from his seat. 'I'll take your trunk up to your room, and have a wee dram before I'm on my way.' He held the door open to the din and the ladies made their way inside, their spines rigid with disapproval.

'Ya mum's here, Willy!' one of the younger men shouted, his hat pulled low over his ears.

'That's not me mum – but *that's* me sister!' Willy called from the bar, his hands around a bottle of grog.

'What nonsense!' Marigold's mother snapped. 'Let us pass!'

'Happily, if Willy's sister gives me a kiss!'

'Oh! The cheek!' Mrs Harrington scolded. 'Look away, Marigold! Look away!'

Marigold did not look away. Her cheeks flamed as her eyes darted through the crowd, taking in the room of men, along with the stink of cigars and cheap cigarettes. There was an upright piano near the entrance to the lounge, the young lady seated there animatedly discussing the next tune she should play. An older man in a crumpled and discoloured woollen jacket nudged Marigold with a dusty red elbow and gave her a wink. She gasped at his over-familiarity and glanced back at her mother to see her face white with shock and rage.

‘Out. Now!’ Mrs Harrington hissed. ‘Marigold, make for the stairs! Surely they won’t dare follow us there!’

Marigold held no such hopes, but she dashed all the same, her small suitcase clamped tightly in her sweating palm. Her legs ached after the long day’s journey, but they carried her safely up the stairs to the first floor, where their trunk was, waiting for them to claim it. One door had been left open, the key inside the lock. Presumably the owner of the establishment regarded the supplying of whisky the priority of his business. Mrs Harrington marched through the open door.

‘Wait, Mother!’ Marigold said. ‘Are we certain this room is ours?’

‘I no longer care, Marigold.’ Her mother was inside and already sitting on the bed. ‘I have travelled all day to this terrible place, and only God *himself* will remove me from this bed!’

Marigold had to agree. She closed the door, turning the key carefully in the lock.

The sound of a tinny old piano and men’s laughter sailed up the stairs as if they were in the room.

‘And you say Jean Beadle recommended this place?’ her mother said. ‘She is obviously more acquainted with the working man than we, so perhaps we can trust her judgement. What’s the committee she’s founded? The Labour League?’

‘Something like that,’ Marigold agreed. ‘I think we should visit Mrs Beadle. I’m certain her interests in the rights of working women will intersect with our own concerns.’

‘Yes, and she’s certainly a woman who gets things done.’ Mrs Harrington brightened. ‘Perhaps she will join us in our work to save families from the scourge of alcohol?’

There came a knock at the door.

‘Oh!’ Mrs Harrington jumped, her grey eyes wide. ‘Are we to be murdered in our beds?’

‘Harringtons?’ came a woman’s voice. ‘Is that you? It’s me – Beadle. The barmaid told me you’d arrived.’

Marigold rushed to the door and opened it to reveal a short woman with her hair pulled back in a severe but practical style. The woman held out her hand and Marigold took it in her own.

‘Thank you for your consideration, Mrs Beadle,’ she said. ‘We’ve been travelling for days now, and we’re glad to see a clean bed, even if it’s above a hotel bar.’

‘We’ll move you out soon,’ Mrs Beadle told her. ‘I know ladies who run very respectable boarding houses who may have a room for you, or we can try to find you tent accommodation if you like . . .’

‘Oh, not to worry!’ Mrs Harrington said, rallying her spirits. ‘We’ll be comfortable in a boarding house until our Herbert makes arrangements for a more permanent dwelling.’

‘Good. We have a meeting on Tuesday for the Boulder Hospital if you’d like to come along and meet some local women,’ Mrs Beadle said. ‘We are demanding a maternity ward for women who can’t afford to pay for births, and a foundling home for abandoned babies. These causes aren’t popular with the wealthy, of course, but they are of the highest importance.’ Mrs Beadle eyed them both as if to discern their respective characters. ‘The Eastern Goldfields Women’s Labour League would welcome you, should you care to join.’

‘Oh, I’m certain we would,’ Marigold told her, and as she spoke there was some terrible shouting from the street. As the women dashed to the balcony, they saw a group of men tumble out of the bar to form a circle around two very rough-looking chaps, their faces ablaze with fury.

‘Bludgers,’ Jean muttered. ‘I’ve seen the type. They’ll be arguing about one of their prostitutes. Disgusting.’

The two men swore at each other viciously, and as the shouting increased they began to trade sickening blows, each greeted by a cheer from the assembled drinkers, who didn’t seem at all shocked by the spectacle.

Marigold leaned out over the railing, horrified and fascinated.

‘Come inside!’ Mrs Harrington demanded. ‘Don’t watch such disgraceful behaviour!’

There was an ear-tearing scream and the women turned to see one of the men clutching his face as blood poured down his shirt and onto the street. ‘My naass!’ he shrieked. ‘He fucking bit off my *nass!*’

Marigold watched in alarm as his assailant neatly spat his opponent’s nose onto the street.

‘What is this place your father has dragged us to?’ Mrs Harrington moaned. ‘Why would he insist on our coming? I think I may die here!’

‘Oh, Mother, calm yourself.’ Marigold showed Mrs Beadle to the door.

‘You’ll need to be made of sterner stuff, Mrs Harrington,’ Mrs Beadle told her. ‘We’ve no room for delicate flowers out here. You must be brave for your daughter.’

‘She shall be,’ Marigold assured her. ‘I think she just needs a good night’s sleep.’

‘We shall see you at the next Labour League meeting,’ Mrs Beadle said. ‘In the hall on Hannan Street. Tuesday. Twelve o’clock.’ She

nodded, then marched down the corridor as if about to assemble the troops – though which troops, Marigold wasn't sure.

As her mother finally drifted off to sleep, Marigold glanced through her father's papers. She'd collected them from his desk to deal with later, then found that it wasn't easy to force the numbers to behave. The figures couldn't be correct, she told herself; they dwindled before her eyes. She knew her father wasn't a wealthy man, but the letters they'd recently received from the bank had grown increasingly demanding. Her father's finances, long stretched, were at breaking point. The neat house in Toorak in which she'd grown up had been mortgaged; the payments were not forthcoming. She already missed the lush lawn, the banks of roses that hung sweetly under the sitting-room window, the lacquered timber stairs that led to her cosy bed.

There was another round of shouting from the street, and Marigold held her hands to her ears for a long moment to block it out, until it became the low sound of singing, that of a man filled with whisky and dreams singing 'Lily of Laguna', wandering home alone.

'I know she likes me, I know she likes me, because she says so! She is my Lily of Laguna; she is my Lily and my Rose!'

Marigold glanced guiltily at her mother on the little bed behind her. How could Marigold tell her that they were about to be cast out of their home? That her father had come to the goldfields to try to save them all?