A woman with blonde hair is wearing a long, flowing red dress with a white lace collar and a fitted bodice. She is standing against a light, textured background.

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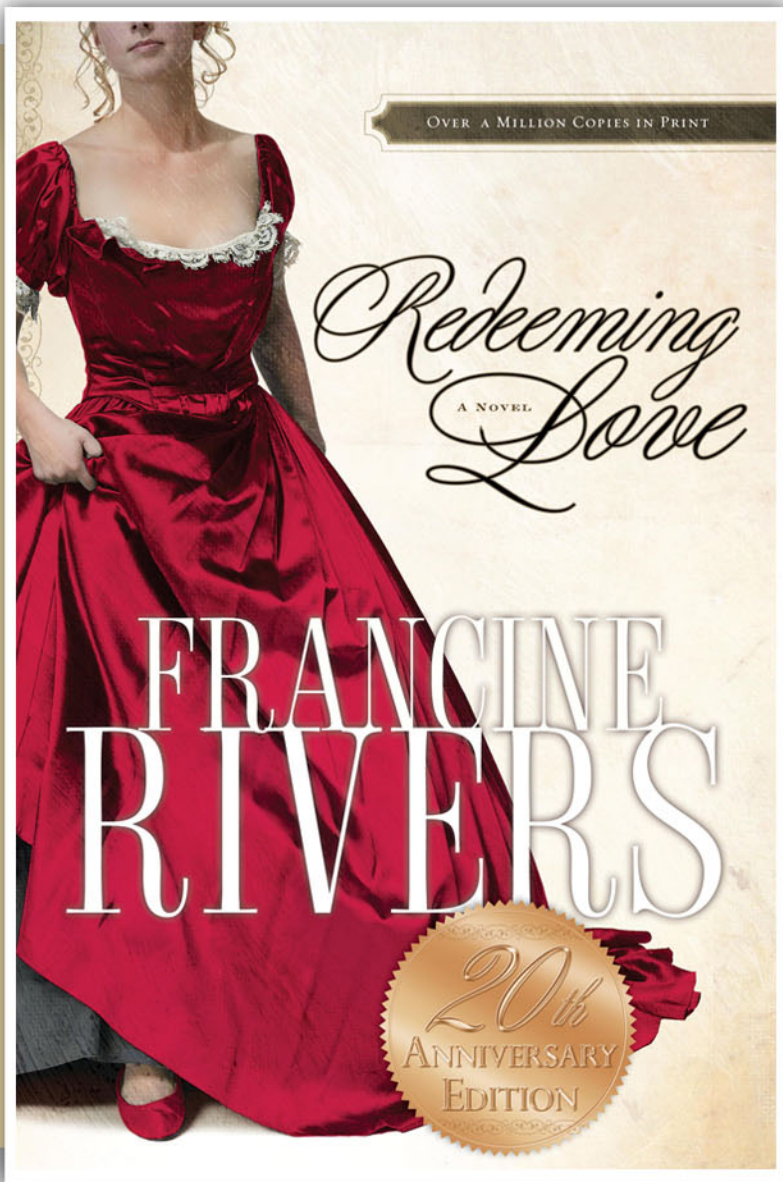
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A NOVEL  
Love*

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RIVERS

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Over the past decade, thousands of letters and e-mails to Francine have poured in from people who, after reading this book, experienced life-changing encounters with God's relentless love, people who felt inspired to love their spouses more, and those who felt the healing touch of true redemption. If you've read this powerful story before, we believe you will be touched more deeply than you were the first time. If you're about to delve in for the first time, prepare to join those of us who have wept, repented, rejoiced, and made new commitments to Christ.

A caution to first-time readers: In this retelling of the biblical story of Hosea and Gomer in an 1800s setting, Francine was faced with some difficult choices. Scripture deals openly and frankly with Gomer's marital infidelity and prostitution. How much "detail" then, should Francine include to bring that impact into a fresh setting? As you can see in her author's note on pages 465–468, she was concerned that her readers would understand why she must deal so directly with these issues. We believe that you will understand—when you have read the whole book. But until you have, please exercise discretion with younger readers. If this book were a movie, it would be rated PG-13.

Here at the WaterBrook Multnomah Publishing Group, we measure the success of our books by whether or not they deliver real life-change to our readers. We aspire to produce books that challenge you to grow and to persevere, and that draw you closer to God. Year after year, *Redeeming Love* continues to do just that. Readers of all ages and genders have been impacted by this touching account of hope and redemption. Many of Francine's fans have hailed this riveting story as one of the best works of fiction of all time. We agree, and we expect you will too.

Stephen W. Cobb  
President  
WaterBrook Multnomah Publishing Group

*Redeeming  
Love*

A NOVEL



FRANCINE  
RIVERS

*Francine Rivers*



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Study Guide written by P. Lynch.

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# Prologue

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*The prince of darkness is a gentleman.*

S H A K E S P E A R E

N E W E N G L A N D , 1 8 3 5

Alex Stafford was just like Mama said. He was tall and dark, and Sarah had never seen anyone so beautiful. Even dressed in dusty riding clothes, his hair damp with perspiration, he was like the princes in the stories Mama read. Sarah's heart beat with wild joy and pride. None of the other fathers she saw at Mass compared to him.

He looked at her with his dark eyes, and her heart sang. She was wearing her best blue frock and white pinafore, and Mama had braided her hair with pink and blue ribbons. Did Papa like the way she looked? Mama said blue was his favorite color, but why didn't he smile? Was she fidgeting? Mama said to stand straight and still and act like a lady. She said he would like that. But he didn't look pleased at all.

"Isn't she beautiful, Alex?" Mama said. Her voice sounded strange...tight, like she was choking. "Isn't she the most beautiful little girl you've ever seen?"

Sarah watched Papa's dark eyes frown. He didn't look happy. He looked angry. Like Mama looked sometimes when Sarah talked too much or asked too many questions.

“Just a few minutes,” Mama said quickly. Too quickly. Was she afraid? But why? “That’s all I’m asking, Alex. Please. It would mean so much to her.”

Alex Stafford stared down at Sarah. His mouth was pressed tight, and he studied her silently. Sarah stood as still as she could. She’d stared at herself in the mirror so long this morning, she knew what he would see. She had her father’s chin and nose, and her mother’s blonde hair and fair skin. Her eyes were like her mother’s, too, although they were even more blue. Sarah wanted Papa to think she was pretty, and she gazed up at him hopefully. But the look in his eyes was not a nice one.

“Did you pick blue on purpose, Mae?” Papa’s words startled Sarah. They were cold and angry. “Because it brings out the color of her eyes?”

Sarah couldn’t help it, she glanced at her mother—and her heart fell. Mama’s face was filled with hurt.

Alex glanced toward the foyer. “Cleo!”

“She’s not here,” Mama said quietly, keeping her head high. “I gave her the day off.”

Papa’s eyes seemed to get even darker. “Did you? Well, that leaves you in a fix, doesn’t it, darling?”

Mama stiffened, then bit her lip and glanced down at Sarah. What was wrong? Sarah wondered sadly. Wasn’t Papa happy to see her? She had been so excited that she was actually going to be with him at last, even for a little while....

“What would you have me do?” Mama’s words were directed at Papa, so Sarah stayed silent, still hoping.

“Send her away. She knows how to find Cleo, I would imagine.”

Pink spots appeared on Mama’s cheeks. “Meaning what, Alex? That I entertain others in your absence?”

Sarah’s smile fell in confusion. They spoke so coldly to one another. Neither looked at her. Had they forgotten she was there? What was wrong? Mama was distraught. Why was Papa so angry about Cleo not being home?

Chewing her lip, Sarah looked between them. Stepping closer, she tugged on her father’s coat. “Papa...”

“Don’t call me that.”

She blinked, frightened and confused by his manner. He was her papa.



Mama said so. He even brought her presents every time he came. Mama gave them to her. Maybe he was angry that she had never thanked him. “I want to thank you for the presents you—”

“Hush, Sarah,” her mother said quickly. “Not now, darling.”

Papa flashed Mama a thunderous look. “Let her speak. It’s what you wanted, isn’t it? Why are you shushing her now, Mae?”

Mama stepped closer and put her hand on Sarah’s shoulder. Sarah could feel Mama’s fingers trembling, but Papa bent toward her now, smiling. “What presents?” he said.

He was so handsome, just like Mama said. She was proud to have a father like him.

“Tell me, little one.”

“I always like the candies you bring me,” Sarah said, feeling warm and proud beneath his attention. “They are very nice. But best of everything, I love the crystal swan.”

She smiled again, glowing with joy that Papa listened to her so carefully. He even smiled, though Sarah wasn’t sure she liked his smile. It was small and tight.

“Indeed,” he said and straightened. He looked at Mama. “I’m so pleased to know how much my gifts mean.”

Sarah looked up at her father, thrilled at his approval. “I put it on my windowsill. The sun shines through it and makes colors dance on the wall. Would you like to come and see?” She took his hand. When he jerked away, she blinked, hurt, not understanding.

Mama bit her lip and reached out a hand toward Papa, then stopped suddenly. She looked afraid again. Sarah looked from one parent to the other, struggling to understand. What had she done wrong? Wasn’t Papa pleased that she liked his presents?

“So you pass on my gifts to the child,” Papa said. “It’s good to know what they mean to you.”

Sarah bit her lip at the coldness in Papa’s voice, but before she could speak, Mama touched her shoulder gently. “Darling, be a good girl and go outside and play now.”

Sarah looked up, distressed. Had she done something wrong? “Can’t I

stay? I'll be very quiet." Mama couldn't seem to say more. Her eyes were moist and she looked at Papa.

Alex bent down to Sarah. "I want you to go outside and play," he said quietly. "I want to talk to your mother alone." He smiled and patted her cheek.

Sarah smiled, utterly enchanted. Papa had touched her; he wasn't angry at all. He loved her! Just as Mama said. "Can I come back when you're done talking?"

Papa straightened stiffly. "Your mother will come and get you when she's ready. Now, run along as you've been told."

"Yes, Papa." Sarah wanted to stay, but she wanted to please her father more. She went out of the parlor, skipping through the kitchen to the back door. She picked a few daisies that grew in the garden patch by the door and then headed for the rose trellis. She plucked the petals. "He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not..." She hushed as she came around the corner. She didn't want to disturb Mama and Papa. She just wanted to be close to them.

Sarah dreamed contentedly. Maybe Papa would put her up on his shoulders. She wondered if he would take her for a ride on his big black horse. She would have to change her dress, of course. He wouldn't want her to soil it. She wished he had let her sit on his lap while he talked to Mama. She would have liked that very much, and she would have been no bother.

The parlor window was open, and she could hear voices. Mama loved the smell of roses to fill the parlor. Sarah wanted to sit and listen to her parents. That way she would know just when Papa wanted her to come back again. If she was very quiet, she wouldn't disturb them, and all Mama would have to do was lean out and call her name.

"What was I to do, Alex? You've never spent so much as a minute with her. What was I to tell her? That her father doesn't care? That he wishes she had never even been born?"

Sarah's lips parted. *Deny it, Papa! Deny it!*

"I brought that swan back from Europe for you, and you throw it away on a child who has no appreciation for its value. Did you give her the pearls as well? What about the music box? I suppose she got that, too!"

The daisies fluttered from Sarah's hand. She sat down on the ground, careless of her pretty dress. Her heart slowed from its wild, happy beat. Everything inside her seemed to spiral downward with each word.

"Alex, please. I didn't see any harm in it. It made it easier. She asked me this morning if she was old enough yet to meet you. She asks me every time she knows you're coming. How could I say no to her again? I didn't have the heart. She doesn't understand your neglect, and neither do I."

"You know how I feel about her."

"How can you say how you feel? You don't even know her. She's a beautiful child, Alex. She's quick and charming and she isn't afraid of anything. She's like you in so many ways. She's *someone*, Alex. You can't ignore her existence forever. She's your daughter...."

"I have enough children by my wife. Legitimate children. I told you I didn't want another."

"How can you say that? How can you not love your own flesh and blood?"

"I told you how I felt from the beginning, but you wouldn't listen. She should never have been born, Mae, but you insisted on having your own way."

"Do you think I wanted to get pregnant? Do you think I planned to have her?"

"I've often wondered. Especially when I arranged a way out of the situation for you and you refused. The doctor I sent you to would have taken care of the whole mess. He would've gotten rid—"

"I couldn't do it. How could you expect me to kill my unborn child? Don't you understand? It's a mortal sin."

"You've spent too much time in church," he said derisively. "Have you ever thought that you wouldn't have the problems you do now if you had gotten rid of her the way I told you. It would've been easy. But you ran out."

"I wanted her!" Mama said brokenly. "She was part of you, Alex, and part of me. I wanted her even if you didn't...."

"Is that the real reason?"

"You're hurting me, Alex!"

Sarah flinched as something shattered. "Is that the real reason, Mae? Or

did you have her because you thought bearing my child would give you a hold over me you otherwise lacked?"

"You can't believe that!" Mama was crying now. "You do, don't you? You're a fool, Alex. Oh, what have I done? I gave up everything for you! My family, my friends, my self-respect, everything I believed in, every hope I ever had...."

"I bought you this cottage. I give you all the money you could possibly need."

Mama's voice rose strangely. "Do you know what it's like for me to walk down the street in this town? You come and go when and as you please. And they know who you are, and they know what I am. No one looks at me. No one speaks to me. Sarah feels it, too. She asked me about it once, and I told her we were different from other people. I didn't know what else to say." Her voice broke. "I'll probably go to hell for what I've become."

"I'm sick of your guilt and I'm sick of hearing about that child. She's ruining everything between us. Do you remember how happy we were? We never argued. I couldn't wait to come to you, to be with you."

"Don't—"

"And how much time do I have left with you today? Enough? You've used it up on her. I told you what would happen, didn't I? I wish she had never been born!"

Mama cried out a terrible name. There was a crash. Terrified, Sarah got up and ran. She raced through Mama's flowers and across the lawn and onto the pathway to the springhouse. She ran until she couldn't run anymore. Gasping, her sides burning, she dropped into the tall grass, her shoulders heaving with sobs, her face streaked with tears. She heard a horse galloping toward her. Scrambling for a better hiding place in the vines about the creek, she peered out and saw her father ride by on his great black horse. Ducking down, she huddled there, crying, and waited for Mama to come fetch her.

But Mama didn't come and she didn't call. After a while, Sarah wandered back to the springhouse and sat by the flowered vines and waited longer. By the time Mama came, Sarah had dried her tears and dusted off her pretty frock. She was still shaking from what she had heard.

Mama was very pale, her eyes dull and red rimmed. There was a blue

mark on the side of her face. She had tried to cover it with powder. She smiled, but it wasn't like her usual smile.

"Where have you been, darling? I've been looking and looking for you." Sarah knew she hadn't. She had been watching for her. Mama licked her lacy handkerchief and wiped a smudge from Sarah's cheek. "Your father was called away suddenly on business."

"Is he coming back?" Sarah was afraid. She never wanted to see him again. He had hurt Mama and made her cry.

"Maybe not for a long time. We'll have to just wait and see. He's a very busy and important man." Sarah said nothing, and her Mama lifted her and hugged her close. "It's all right, sweetheart. You know what we're going to do? We're going to go back to the cottage and change our dresses. Then we'll pack a picnic and go down to the creek. Would you like that?"

Sarah nodded and put her arms around Mama's neck. Her mouth trembled, and she tried not to cry. If she cried, Mama might guess she had been eavesdropping and then she would be angry too.

Mama held her tightly, her face buried in Sarah's hair. "We'll make it through this. You'll see, sweetheart. We will. *We will.*"

Alex didn't come back, and Mama grew thin and wan. She stayed in bed too late, and when she got up, she didn't want to go for long walks the way she used to. When she smiled, her eyes didn't light up. Cleo said she needed to eat more. Cleo said a lot of things, carelessly, with Sarah close enough to hear.

"He's still sending you money, Miss Mae. That's something."

"I don't care about the money." Mama's eyes filled up. "I've never cared about it."

"You'd care if you didn't have any."

Sarah tried to cheer Mama up by bringing her big bouquets of flowers. She found pretty stones and washed them, giving them to her as presents. Mama always smiled and thanked her, but there was no sparkle in her eyes. Sarah sang the songs Mama taught her, sad Irish ballads and a few Latin chants from mass.

"Mama, why don't you sing anymore?" Sarah asked, climbing up onto

the bed with her and setting her doll in the rumpled covers. “You’ll feel better if you sing.”

Mama brushed her long blonde hair slowly. “I don’t feel much like singing, darling. Mama has a lot on her mind right now.”

Sarah felt a heaviness growing inside her. It was all her fault. All her fault. If she hadn’t been born, Mama would be happy. “Will Alex come back, Mama?”

Mama looked at her, but Sarah didn’t care. She wouldn’t call him Papa anymore. He had hurt Mama and made her sad. Ever since he’d left, Mama had scarcely paid attention to her. Sarah had even heard Mama tell Cleo that love wasn’t a blessing, it was a curse.

Sarah glanced at Mama’s face, and her heart sank. She looked so sad. Her thoughts were far away again, and Sarah knew she was thinking of *him*. Mama wanted him to come back. Mama cried at night because he didn’t. Mama pressed her face into her pillow at night, but Sarah still heard her sobs.

She chewed on her lip and lowered her head, playing distractedly with her doll. “What if I got sick and died, Mama?”

“You won’t get sick,” Mama said, glancing at her. She smiled. “You’re far too young and healthy to die.”

Sarah watched her mother brushing her hair. It was like sunshine flowing over her pale shoulders. Mama was so pretty. How could Alex not love her? “But if I did, Mama, would he come back and stay with you?”

Mama went very still. She turned and stared at Sarah, and the horrified look in her eyes frightened her. She shouldn’t have said that. Now Mama might guess she’d heard them fighting...

“Don’t ever think that, Sarah.”

“But—”

“No! Don’t you ever ask such a question again. Do you understand?”

Mama had never raised her voice before; Sarah felt her chin quiver. “Yes, Mama.”

“Never again,” Mama said more gently. “Promise me. None of this has anything to do with you, Sarah.” Mama reached out to pull her into her arms and stroke her tenderly. “I love you, Sarah. I love you so much. I love

you more than anything or anyone in the whole wide world.”

Except for him, Sarah thought. Except for Alex Stafford. What if he came back? What if he made Mama choose? What would Mama do then?

Afraid, Sarah clung to her mother and prayed he would stay away.

A young man came to see Mama.

Sarah watched her mother speak with him while Sarah played with her doll near the fireplace. The only people who came to this cottage were Mister Pennyrod, who brought firewood, and Bob. Bob liked Cleo. He worked at the market and teased Cleo about rump roasts and juicy legs o’ lamb. Cleo laughed at him, but Sarah didn’t think he was very funny. He wore a soiled white apron covered with blood.

The young man gave Mama a letter, but she didn’t open it. She served him tea, and he said thank you. He didn’t say very much after that, except to talk about the weather and how pretty Mama’s flower garden was. He said it was a long ride from the city. Mama gave him biscuits and forgot all about Sarah.

She knew something was wrong. Mama sat too straight and she spoke very softly. “She’s a pretty little girl,” the man said and smiled at her. Sarah looked down again, embarrassed, afraid Mama would send her from the room because he had noticed her.

“Yes, she is. Thank you.”

“She looks like you. Pretty as a sunrise.”

Mama smiled at her. “Sarah, why don’t you go outside and cut some flowers for the table.”

Sarah took her doll and went out without a word of argument. She wanted to please Mama. She took a sharp knife from the kitchen drawer and went out to the flower garden. Mama loved roses best. Sarah added spikes of larkspur, red stock, ranunculus, marguerites, and daisies until the straw basket on her arm was full.

When she came back inside, the young man was gone. The letter was open in Mama’s lap. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks full of lively color. She smiled as she folded the letter and tucked it into her sleeve. She stood

and came to Sarah, lifting her and swinging her around gaily. “Thank you for getting the flowers, darling.” She kissed Sarah. When Mama put her down, Sarah put the basket on the table.

“I just love flowers,” Mama said. “They’re so lovely, aren’t they? Why don’t you arrange them this time? I need to find something in the kitchen. Oh, Sarah! It’s a beautiful, wonderful day, isn’t it?”

It was a wretched day, Sarah thought, watching her go. She felt sick with dread. She lifted the big vase down from the table and carried it outside, dumping the wilted flowers on the compost. She pumped fresh water and poured it into the vase. It sloshed on her dress as she carried it back and slid it onto the table again. She didn’t trim the stems or remove leaves. She didn’t care how they looked and she knew Mama wouldn’t even notice.

Alex Stafford was coming back.

Mama returned to the parlor with Cleo. “Oh, darling, I’ve the most wonderful news. Cleo has made plans to go to the seashore this week and she wants to take you with her. Isn’t that grand?”

Sarah’s heart beat fast and hard.

“Isn’t that sweet of her?” Mama went on brightly. “She has a friend who runs an inn, and he just loves little girls.”

Cleo’s smile was stiff and cool.

Sarah looked at her mother. “I don’t want to go, Mama. I want to stay with you.” She knew what was happening. Mama was sending her away because her father didn’t want her. Maybe Mama didn’t want her now either.

“Nonsense,” Mama laughed. “You’ve never been anywhere but here and you need to see something of the world. You’ll like the ocean, Sarah. It’s so lovely. And you can sit on the sand and listen to the waves. You can build castles and find seashells. Just wait until you feel the foam tickle your toes.”

Mama looked alive again. Sarah knew it was the letter. Alex must have written he was coming to see Mama. She wouldn’t want another scene like the last one, so she was putting Sarah out of his way. She watched her mother’s glowing face, her heart sinking.

“Come on now, darling. Let’s get you ready to go.”

Sarah watched her things being folded and stuffed into a carpetbag. Mama couldn’t wait to be rid of her. “Where’s your doll?” Mama said, look-



ing around. “You’ll want to take her along with you.”

“No.”

“Why not? You’re never without your doll.”

“She wants to stay home with you.”

Mama frowned, but she didn’t pursue it. Nor did she change her mind.

Cleo came back for Sarah, and they made the mile walk to town. Cleo purchased the tickets just as the coach rolled in. The driver took charge of the carpetbags, and Cleo lifted Sarah into the coach. When the servant climbed in, she sat across from her and smiled. Her brown eyes were very bright. “We’re going to have an adventure, Sarah.”

Sarah wanted to jump out of the coach and run home to Mama, but Mama would only send her back again. As the horses set off, Sarah clung to the window, peering out as the familiar houses swept past. The coach rattled over the bridge and traveled on a wood-lined road. Everything familiar to Sarah was quickly gone from sight, and she sank back against the bouncing seat. The further they went, the more desolate she felt.

“We’ll stay at the Four Winds,” Cleo said, clearly pleased that Sarah seemed content to be quiet. She’d probably expected her to fuss. If she’d thought it would change Mama’s mind, she might have done so. She’d never been away from Mama for more than a few hours. But Sarah had known it wouldn’t change things. Alex Stafford was coming, so she had to go. She sat still and solemn.

“They’ve fine food and decent rooms,” Cleo told her. “And we’ll be close to the sea. You can walk along a little grassy path and come to the bluffs. The surf pounds on the rocks. It’s a wonderful sound, and the smell of the salt air is better than anything.”

Better than anything...

Sarah liked home and the flower garden behind the cottage. She liked sitting beside the springhouse with Mama, their bare feet dangling in the creek.

Fighting tears, she looked out the window again. Her eyes smarted and her throat became raw from the road dust. The hours passed slowly; the hard pounding of the horses’ hooves made her head ache. She was tired—so tired she could scarcely keep her eyes open, but each time she closed them,

the coach would lurch or sway sharply, frightening her awake.

The driver stopped the coach once to change horses and make minor repairs. Cleo took Sarah to the backhouse. When Sarah came out again, Cleo was nowhere to be seen. Sarah ran to the coach, then to the stables, and finally to the road, crying out Cleo's name.

"Hush that noise! My heavens, what is the ruckus all about?" Cleo said, hurrying toward her. "One would think you were a chicken without your head the way you're running about."

"Where *were* you?" Sarah demanded, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Mama said we were to stay together!"

Cleo's brows arched. "Well, excuse me, your ladyship, but I was having myself a mug of ale." She reached down and snatched Sarah's hand, leading her back toward the station building.

The station manager's wife was standing in the doorway, drying her hands. "What a pretty little girl," she said, smiling at Sarah. "Are you hungry, sweetheart? You've time for a bowl of shepherd's stew."

Sarah lowered her eyes, timid beneath the woman's scrutiny. "No, thank you, ma'am."

"And polite, too," the lady said.

"Come along, Sarah," Cleo said, giving her a nudge inside.

The lady patted Sarah's back as she ushered her to a table. "You need to put a little meat on your bones, honey. You give my stew a try. I'm said to be one of the best cooks on the line."

Cleo sat down and took up her mug of ale again. "You need to eat something before we leave."

"I'm not hungry."

Cleo leaned forward. "I don't care if you're hungry or not," she said in a low voice. "You'll do as you're told. The driver said it will be another half hour before we can leave, and it'll be three or four more hours before we reach the coast. I don't want to hear you whining that you're hungry then. This is your last chance to eat something until the Four Winds."

Sarah stared at Cleo, struggling not to cry. Cleo sighed heavily, then reached out to pat her face awkwardly. "Just eat something, Sarah," she said. Obediently, Sarah picked up her spoon and began to eat. Mama had said

this trip was planned for her, but even Cleo acted as though she were in the way. It was clear Mama had sent her off to get rid of her.

When they set off in the coach again, Sarah was quiet. She sat beside the window and stared out, her small hands clasped in her lap, her back straight. Cleo seemed grateful for the silence, finally dozing off. When she awakened, she smiled at Sarah.

“Smell the sea air?” she asked. Sarah was sitting in the same position she’d been in when Cleo went to sleep, but she knew her dusty face had white streaks from the tears she’d been unable to stop. Cleo just stared at her sadly, then turned to stare out the window.

They arrived at the Four Winds just after sunset. Sarah clung to Cleo’s hand while the driver untied their carpetbags. Sarah heard a great roaring like a monster and was afraid. “What’s that sound, Cleo?”

“The sea crashing on the rocks. Grand, isn’t it?”

Sarah thought it was the most fearsome sound she had ever heard. The wind howled in the trees like a wild beast searching for warm-blooded prey, and when the door to the Four Winds opened, she heard loud laughter and men shouting. Sarah drew back sharply, not wanting to go inside.

“Be careful there,” Cleo said, pushing her forward. “Take your bag. I’ve got my own to carry.”

Sarah dragged her bag to the edge of the door. Cleo shoved the door open with her shoulder and went in, Sarah following right behind her. Cleo looked around the room, then smiled. Sarah followed her gaze and saw a man at the bar, arm-wrestling with a brawny sailor. A big man was pouring ale, and he spotted Cleo right away. He leaned over to nudge the man who was arm-wrestling and nodded toward Cleo with a quiet word. The man turned his head slightly, and the sailor, taking advantage of his lack of attention, smashed his arm down on the bar with a shout of triumph. Sarah watched in fear as the beaten man surged to his feet and hit the sailor in the right eye, sending him crashing to the floor.

Cleo laughed. She seemed to have forgotten Sarah, who was now hiding behind her skirts. Sarah whimpered quietly when the man from the bar made his way to Cleo and gave her a sound kiss, to the shouts of the other men in the room. When he looked past Cleo to stare at Sarah, she thought

she would faint from fear. He raised his eyebrows. “A by-blow? You must’ve taken up with a pretty fellow by the looks of her.”

It was a moment before Cleo had her breath back and knew what he was talking about. “Oh, her. No, Merrick. She’s not mine. She’s daughter of the lady I work for.”

“What’s she doing here with you?”

“It’s a long, sad story I’d rather forget just now.”

Merrick nodded and patted her cheek. “How do you like country life?” He smiled, but Sarah didn’t think it was a nice smile.

Cleo tossed her head. “It’s everything I ever hoped it would be.”

He laughed and took her carpetbag. “That’s why you’re back at the Four Winds, eh?” He took Sarah’s bag, too, and grinned boldly, laughing when she drew back from him as though he were the devil himself.

Sarah had never seen anyone like Merrick. He was very big and had black hair and a trimmed beard. He reminded her of the pirate stories Mama told her. His voice was loud and deep, and he looked at Cleo as though he wanted to eat her up. Cleo didn’t seem to mind. She paid no attention to Sarah and walked across the room. Sarah followed, too afraid to be left behind. Everyone was staring at her.

“Hey, Stump, give our Cleo a mug of ale!” Merrick shouted to the grizzled barkeeper who welcomed Cleo with a wink and grin. Merrick caught Sarah around the waist and lifted her high, plunking her down on the bar. “And some watered wine for this pale chick.” He felt her velvet jacket. “Your mama must be rich, eh?”

“Her papa is rich,” Cleo said. “He’s also married.”

“Oh.” Merrick gave Cleo a mocking grin. “So that’s how it is. I thought you was after respectable work.”

“It is respectable. No one looks down their nose at me.”

“Do they know you worked in an alehouse for five years before you decided to improve your station in life?” He slid his hand down her arm. “Not to mention a little work on the side...”

Cleo glanced at Sarah, then brushed his hand away. “Mae knows. She’s not one to look down on others. I like her.”

“Does this little mite look anything like her?”

“Spitting image.”

Merrick chucked Sarah’s chin and stroked her cheek. “Eyes blue as violets and hair like an angel. Your mama must be mighty pretty if she’s anything like you. I’d like to see her.”

Cleo stiffened, and Sarah thought she was angry. She wished Merrick would leave her alone, but he kept stroking her cheek. Sarah wanted to get as far away as she could from this awful man with his black beard and dark eyes and mean grin.

“Leave her alone, Merrick. She’s scared enough as it is without you teasing her. This is her first time away from her mama.”

He laughed. “She does look a little white around the gills. Come on, mite. I’m harmless. Drink up.” He pushed the mug of watered wine to her. “That’s it. A little of this and you won’t be scared of nothing.” He laughed again when Sarah grimaced with distaste. “Is she used to something better?”

“She’s used to nothing,” Cleo said, and Sarah was more sure now that she was angry. Cleo didn’t like it that Merrick was paying so much attention to her. She looked at Sarah, clearly annoyed at the way she was reacting to Merrick. “Don’t be such a coward. He’s all wind and little else.” Old Stump and the others at the bar laughed, Merrick with them.

Sarah wanted to jump down and run away from the loud voices, the laughter, and the staring eyes. She gave a soft sob of relief when Cleo reached out to lift her down, then took her hand, guiding her to a table. She bit her lip when Merrick followed them. He pulled out a chair and sat down. Whenever the mugs got empty, he ordered more. He made jokes, and Cleo laughed a lot. Once he reached under the table, and Cleo pushed him away. But she was smiling, and she was talking more and more. And her voice sounded funny, like the words were all running together.

It was raining outside, and branches scraped against the windowpane. Sarah was tired, her eyelids so heavy she could hardly keep them open.

Merrick raised his mug again. “Mite’s dragging her sails.”

Cleo touched Sarah’s head. “Cross your arms on the table and sleep awhile.” Sarah did as she was told, wishing they could leave. Cleo obviously wasn’t ready to leave. She seemed to be having a good time, and she kept

staring at Merrick and smiling in a way Sarah had never seen her smile before.

“Why’d you have to bring her to the Four Winds?” Merrick said. Sarah kept her eyes closed, pretending she was asleep.

“Because her mama is entertaining her fine papa and they both wanted her out of the way.” Cleo’s words were cold. “Don’t do that.”

“Don’t?” He laughed low. “You know it’s what you came for. What’s the matter with those country boys?”

“Nothing. One’s after me to marry him.”

“Let’s go upstairs and talk about why you came back here.”

“What am I supposed to do with her? I was so angry when Mae stuck me with her.”

Tears pricked Sarah’s eyes, and her throat closed up. Didn’t anyone want her anymore?

“Seems to me it’d be easy to farm out the pretty little thing. Somebody ought to want her.”

“That’s what I told Mae, but she says no. She trusts me. The only thing she’s got when her man isn’t around to play house is this child. About the only thing Mae knows is how to look pretty and how to grow flowers.”

“I thought you said you liked her.”

“I like her well enough, but anytime His Majesty decides to call, guess who gets stuck with her by-blow. It gets tiresome dragging a child around with you, especially one that doesn’t even belong to you.”

Merrick chuckled. “Well, why don’t we just toss her off the point? Maybe her mama and papa would see it as a favor. Might even give you a bonus.”

Sarah’s heart pounded.

“That’s not funny, Merrick.” Cleo’s sigh was heavy, annoyed. “I’d better wake her and put her to bed. She’s had a long day.” She nudged Sarah, who looked up in relief. Cleo took her hand. “Come on. We’re going up to bed now. Say goodnight to Mister Merrick.”

He grinned. “I’ll see you safely upstairs, ladies.”

When Cleo opened the door of her old room, Merrick held it ajar and came inside. Sarah looked at Cleo in alarm.

“What’re you doing?” Cleo whispered fiercely. “You can’t come in here

with me. She'll tell her mother, and I'll lose my position."

"I'll take care of that." Merrick bent and pinched Sarah's chin. "You say anything to anybody about me being in this room with Cleo, and I'll cut your little pink tongue out. Understand?" Sarah believed him, and nodded her head. He smiled slightly and let her go. She darted to the corner and crouched there, trembling and feeling sick. "See?" Merrick crowed gleefully. "Nothing to worry about. She won't say a word about us to anyone."

Cleo stared at him, her eyes wide. She looked upset, and Sarah hoped she would tell him to leave. "That was terrible cruel," she said, looking at Sarah. "He didn't mean it, lovey. He was only fooling. Don't believe a word he says."

"You believe it, girl. I wasn't fooling at all." He caught Cleo to him. "Cruel? Cruel would be putting me out when you know I just want to be with you."

She pushed him away. He reached for her again, and she dodged him—but even Sarah could tell the effort was half-hearted. How could Cleo let this man near her?

"I know you, Cleo." Merrick's smile was half-mast, his eyes gleaming. "Why did you come all the way back to the Four Winds? Just to look at the sea again?"

"It's in my blood as much as yours."

Merrick caught hold of her and kissed her. Cleo struggled, trying to pull away, but he held her tightly. When she relaxed against him, he drew back enough to say, "More than that's in your blood."

"Merrick, don't. She's watching—"

"So what?"

He kissed her again, and she fought him this time. Sarah sat frozen in fear. Maybe he would just kill them both.

"No!" Cleo said angrily. "Get out of here. I can't do this. I'm supposed to be taking care of *her*."

He laughed. "I didn't know duty was so important to you." He let her go, but Sarah didn't think Cleo looked glad at all. She looked like she was going to cry. Merrick smiled and turned his back to Sarah. "Come on, mite."

"What're you doing, Merrick?" Cleo demanded when Sarah scrambled to escape him.

“Putting her out. It won’t hurt her to sit in the hallway awhile. And don’t say no. I know you too well. Besides, she’ll be right outside the door. No one’s going to bother her.” He dragged a blanket and pillow from the bed and motioned to Sarah. “Don’t make me come get you.”

Sarah didn’t dare disobey.

She followed Merrick into the hallway, watching as he dumped the blanket and pillow in the darkened corridor. Something large scurried down the hall and hid in the darkness. She stared at him, wide-eyed.

“You sit right there and don’t move. If you don’t stay put, I’ll find you and take you down to the sea and feed you to the crabs. Understand?”

Sarah’s mouth was dry, and she couldn’t make any words come out. So she just nodded.

Cleo came to the doorway. “Merrick, I can’t leave her out there. I saw a rat.”

“She’s too small for the rats to bother with. She’ll be fine.” He patted Sarah’s cheek. “Won’t you? You stay out here until Cleo fetches you. Don’t you move from this spot until she does.”

“Y-yes, sir,” she stammered, her voice catching in her throat.

“See?” He straightened and turned Cleo around, pushing her back into the room. He closed the door firmly behind them.

Sarah heard Merrick talking and Cleo giggling. Then she heard other sounds as well and she was afraid. She wanted to run away from the sounds they made, but remembered what Merrick had said he would do to her if she moved. Terrified, she covered her head with the dirty blanket and pressed her hands over her ears.

The silence that followed grew heavy. Sarah peeked down the darkened corridor. She felt eyes watching her. What if the rat came back? Her heart was like a drum, her whole body wracked with its beat. She heard soft scratching and drew her legs in tight against her body, staring into the darkness, terrified of what lurked there.

The door clicked open, and she jumped. Merrick came out. She pressed herself back, hoping he wouldn’t notice her. He didn’t. He had forgotten she existed. He didn’t even glance at her as he went down the hall and stairs. Cleo would fetch her now. Cleo would bring her out of this dark corridor.



Minutes passed, then an hour, and another.

Cleo didn't come out for her. Curling in the blanket and pressing against the wall, Sarah waited—as she had waited for Mama that day when Alex had come.

Cleo's head ached when she awakened with the sunlight on her face. She had drunk too much ale last night and her tongue felt swollen. She stretched out her hand, but Merrick was gone. It was like him. She wasn't going to worry about it now. After last night, how could he deny he loved her? She needed coffee. Rising, she washed her face and put on her clothes. Opening the door, she saw the child huddled in the cold hall, her blue eyes darkly shadowed.

"Oh!" Cleo said faintly. She had forgotten all about her charge. Fear and guilt attacked her. What if Mae found out she'd left her daughter in a cold dark corridor for an entire night? She picked Sarah up and carried her into the room. Her little hands were like ice, and she was so white.

"Don't tell your mama," she said tearfully. "It'll be your fault if she lets me go." She grew angry to be put in such a precarious situation, her position dependent on the silence of a child. "Why didn't you come to bed last night the way you were supposed to? Merrick told you to come back inside when he left."

"No, he didn't. He said not to move until you fetched me," Sarah whispered wretchedly, beginning to cry at Cleo's anger.

"Don't lie! I heard him! He didn't say that at all!"

Sarah cried harder, looking confused and frightened. "I'm sorry, Cleo. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." The little girl's eyes were wide and red-rimmed. "Please don't tell Merrick. Don't let him toss me off the point or feed me to the crabs like he said he would."

"Hush! Stop crying," Cleo said, calming down. "Crying doesn't do any good. Has it ever done your mama any good?" Filled with remorse, she pulled Sarah into her arms and held her. "We won't tell anyone. We'll keep it between the two of us."

Merrick didn't come back to the Four Winds, and Cleo got drunk that

night. She put Sarah to bed early and went back down to the bar, hoping he would come in later. He didn't. She stayed a little longer, laughing with other men and pretending she didn't care. Then she took a bottle of rum upstairs. Sarah was sitting up in bed, wide awake, her eyes huge.

Cleo wanted to talk. She wanted to vent her spleen on Merrick. She hated him for breaking her heart again. She had let him do it to her so many times before. When would she learn to say no to him? Why had she come back? She should've known what would happen, what always happened.

"I'm going to tell you God's truth, little girl. You listen good." She took a long drink and swallowed down the tears and misery and let the bitterness and anger rise and flow. "All men want to do is use you. When you give them your heart, they tear it to shreds." She drank more, and her voice slurred. "None of 'em care. Take your fine papa. Does he care about your mother? No."

Sarah dug frantically beneath the covers and plugged her ears. So the little princess didn't want to hear the awful truth? Well, that was just too bad. Furious, Cleo dragged the blankets off her. When Sarah scrambled away, she grabbed her by the legs and dragged her back. "Sit up and listen to me!" She pulled the child up and shook her. Sarah squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face away. "Look at me!" Cleo raged, not satisfied until she obeyed.

Sarah stared at her with wide frightened eyes. She trembled violently. Cleo eased her grip. "Your mama told me to take good care of you," she said. "Well, I am going to take care of you. I'm going to tell you God's truth. You listen and you learn." She let go and Sarah sat very still.

Glaring at the little girl, Cleo dropped into the chair by the window and took another swig of rum. She pointed, trying to steady her hand. "Your fine papa doesn't care about anyone, least of all you. And all he cares about your mother is what she's willing to give him. And she gives him everything. He shows up when he pleases, uses her, then rides off to his fine house in town with his aristocratic wife and well-bred children. And your mother? She lives for the next time she'll see him."

She watched Sarah inch back until she was pressed tightly against the peeling wall. As though that would protect her. Nothing protected a woman from the cold hard facts. Cleo gave a sad laugh and shook her head.

“She’s such a sweet stupid fool. She waits for him and falls on her face to kiss his feet when he comes back. You know why he went away for so long? Because of you. He can’t stand the sight of his own spawn. Your mama cries and begs, and what good’s it ever done her? Sooner or later, he’s going to get tired of her and toss her into the trash. And you with her. That’s the one thing you can count on.”

Sarah was crying now, and she reached up to wipe tears from her cheeks.

“Nobody cares about anybody in this world,” Cleo said, feeling sadder and more morose by the second. “We all just use each other in one way or another. To feel good. To feel bad. To feel nothing at all. The lucky ones are real good at it. Like Merrick. Like your rich papa. The rest of us just take what we can get.”

Cleo was having trouble thinking straight. She wanted to keep talking, but her eyelids were so heavy she couldn’t keep them open. She sank lower into her chair and rested her chin on her chest.

All she needed was to rest for a minute. That was all. Then everything would be better...

Sarah watched as Cleo kept mumbling, sagging deeper into the chair, until she went to sleep. She slept loudly, spittle dripping from the corner of her sagging mouth.

Sarah sat in the rumpled bed, shivering and wondering if Cleo was right. But deep inside of her, something told her she was. If her father cared, would he have wanted her dead? If Mama cared, would she have sent her away?

God’s truth. What was God’s truth?

They left the next morning. Sarah never once glimpsed the sea.

When they arrived home, Mama pretended everything was fine, but Sarah knew something was terribly wrong. There were boxes out, and Mama was packing her things.

“We’re going to visit your grandmother and grandfather,” Mama said brightly, but her eyes looked dull and dead. “They’ve never seen you.” She

told Cleo she was sorry to dismiss her, and Cleo said that was fine. She had decided to marry Bob, the butcher, after all. Mama said she hoped Cleo would be very happy, and Cleo went away.

Sarah awakened in the middle of the night. Mama wasn't in the bed, but Sarah could hear her. She followed the sound of her mother's stricken voice and went into the parlor. The window was open, and she went to look out. What was Mama doing outside in the middle of the night?

Moonlight flowed over the flower garden and Sarah saw her mother kneeling in her thin white nightgown. She was ripping all the flowers out. Handful after handful, she yanked the plants up and flung them in all directions, weeping and talking to herself as she did. She picked up a knife and came to her feet. She went down again on her knees beside her beloved rose bushes. One after another, she cut the roots. Every last one of them.

Then she bent forward and sobbed, rocking herself back and forth, back and forth, the knife still in her hand.

Sarah sank down onto the floor inside and hid in the darkness of the parlor, her hands covering her head.

They rode in a coach all the next day and slept that night in an inn. Mama said little, and Sarah held her doll pressed tightly against her chest. There was one bed in the room, and Sarah slept contentedly in her mother's arms. When she awakened in the morning, Mama was sitting at the window and running the rosary beads through her fingers as she prayed. Sarah listened, not understanding, as her mother repeated the same phrases over and over.

"Forgive me, Jesus. I did it to myself. Mea culpa, mea culpa..."

They rode another day in another coach and came to a town. Mama was tense and pale. She brushed Sarah off and straightened her hat. She took Sarah's hand, and they walked a long, long time until they reached a tree-lined street.

Mama came to a white fence and stopped at the gate. "Lord, please, please, let them forgive me," she whispered. "Oh, please, God."

Sarah looked at the house before her. It was not much bigger than the cottage, but it had a nice porch and pots of flowers on the window sills. Lace

curtains hung in all the windows. She liked it very much.

When they reached the door, Mama took a deep breath and knocked. A woman came to answer. She was small and gray and wore a flowered gingham dress covered by a white apron. She stared and stared at Mama and her blue eyes filled with tears. "Oh," she said. "Oh. *Oh*..."

"I've come home, Mother," Mama said. "Please. Let me come home."

"It's not that easy. You know it's not that easy."

"I've nowhere else to go."

The lady looked at Sarah. "I don't have to ask if this is your child," she said with a sad smile. "She's very beautiful."

"Please, Mama."

The lady opened the door and let them in. She showed them into a small room with lots of books. "Wait here and I'll speak with your father," she said and went away. Mama paced, wringing her hands. She paused once and closed her eyes, her lips moving. The lady came back, her face white and lined, her cheeks wet. "No," she said. One word. That was all. No.

Mama took a step toward the door, and the lady stopped her. "He'll only say things that will hurt you more."

"Hurt? How could I be hurt more, Mama?"

"Mae, please, don't..."

"I'll beg. I'll get down on my knees. I'll tell him he was right. He *was* right."

"It won't do any good. He said as far as he's concerned his daughter is dead."

Mae swept past her. "I'm not dead!" The lady gestured for Sarah to stay in the room. She hastened after Mama, closing the door as she left. Sarah waited, hearing distant voices.

Mama came back after a while. Her face was white, but she wasn't crying anymore. "Come on, darling," she said in a dull tone. "We're leaving."

"Mae," the lady said. "Oh, Mae..." She pressed something into her hand. "It's all I have."

Mama didn't say anything. A man's voice came from another room, an angry, demanding voice. "I have to go," the lady said. Mama nodded and turned away.

When they reached the end of the tree-lined street, Mae opened her

hand and looked at the money her mother had placed in it. She gave a soft broken laugh. After a moment, she took Sarah's hand and walked on, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Mama sold her ruby ring and pearls. She and Sarah lived in an inn until the money gave out. Mama sold her music box, and for a while they lived quite comfortably in an inexpensive boardinghouse. Finally, she asked Sarah to give back the crystal swan, and with the money they got for it, they lived a long time in a rundown hotel before Mama found and settled them for good in a shack near the docks of New York.

Sarah finally saw the sea. There was garbage floating in it. But still she liked it very much.

Sometimes she would go down and sit on the wharf. She liked the salt smell and the ships coming in loaded with cargo. She liked the sounds of the water lapping at the pillars beneath her and the seagulls overhead.

There were rough men at the docks and sailors who came from around the world. Some came to visit, and Mama would ask Sarah to wait outside until they left. They never stayed very long. Sometimes they pinched her cheek and said they would come back when she got a little bigger. Some said she was prettier than Mama, but Sarah knew that wasn't true.

She didn't like them. Mama laughed when they came and acted as though she were happy to see them. But when they went away, she cried and drank whiskey until she fell asleep in the rumpled bed by the window.

At seven years old, Sarah wondered if Cleo hadn't been partly right about God's truth.

Then Uncle Rab came to live with them, and things got better. Not as many men came to visit, though they still did when Uncle Rab didn't have any coins to jingle in his pockets. He was big and dull, and Mama treated him with affection. They slept together in the bed by the window, and Sarah had the cot on the floor.

"He's not too bright," Mama said to her, "but he has a kind heart and he tries to provide for us. Times are hard, darling, and sometimes he can't. He needs Mama's help."

Sometimes he just wanted to sit outside the door and get drunk and sing songs about women.

When it rained, he would go to the inn down the road to be with his friends. Mama would drink and sleep. To pass the time, Sarah found tin cans and washed them until they shone like silver. She set them beneath the roof leaks. Then she would sit in the quiet shack with the rain beating down and listen to the music the drops made plinking into the tins.

Cleo had been right about crying, too. Crying did no good. Mama cried and cried until Sarah wanted to cover her ears and never hear her again. All Mama's crying never changed anything.

When the other children mocked Sarah and called her mother names, she looked at them and said nothing. What they said was true; you couldn't argue with it. When she felt the tears coming up, building like a great hard pressure inside her, hot, so hot she thought they would burn, she swallowed them down deeper and deeper until they became a hard little stone in her chest. She learned to look back at her tormentors and smile with cold arrogance and disdain. She learned to pretend nothing they said could touch her. And sometimes she convinced herself nothing did.

The winter Sarah was eight, Mama became ill. She didn't want a doctor. She said all she needed was rest. But she kept getting worse, her breathing more labored. "Take care of my little girl, Rab," Mama said. She smiled the way she had long ago.

She died in the morning, the first sunlight of spring on her face and her rosary beads in her dead-white hands. Rab wept violently, but Sarah had no tears. The heaviness inside her seemed almost too great to bear. When Rab went out for a while, she lay down beside Mama and put her arms around her.

Mama was so cold and stiff. Sarah wanted to warm her. Sarah's eyes felt gritty and hot. She closed them and whispered over and over, "Wake up, Mama. Wake up. Please, wake up." When she didn't, Sarah couldn't stop the tears. "I want to go with you. Take me, too. God, please, I want to go with my mama." She wept until exhaustion overtook her and only awakened when Rab lifted her away from the bed. Men were with him.

Sarah saw they meant to handle Mama and she screamed at them to

leave her alone. Rab held her tight, almost smothering her in his foul-smelling shirt, while the others began wrapping Mama in a sheet. Sarah went silent when she saw what they had done. Rab let her go, and she sat down hard on the floor and didn't move.

The men talked as though she weren't there. Maybe she wasn't anymore. Maybe she was different, the way Mama once said.

"I bet Mae was real pretty once," one said as he began sewing the shroud closed over Mama's face.

"She's better off dead," Rab said, crying again. "At least now she's not unhappy. She's free."

*Free, Sarah thought. Free of me. If I hadn't been born, Mama would live in a nice cottage in the country with flowers all around. Mama would be happy. Mama would be alive.*

"Wait a minute," said one, and pried the rosary from Mama's fingers and dropped it in Sarah's lap. "I bet she woulda wanted you to have that, honey." He finished the stitching while Sarah ran the beads through her cold fingers and stared at nothing.

They all went away, Mama with them. Sarah sat alone for a long time wondering if Rab would keep his promise to take care of her. When night came and he didn't come back, Sarah went down to the docks and flung the rosary into a garbage scow. "What good are you?" she cried out to the heavens.

No answer came.

She remembered Mama's going to the big church and talking to the man in black. He talked a long time, and Mama had listened, her head bowed, tears running down her cheeks. Mama never went back, but sometimes she would still sift the beads through her slender fingers while the rain spat on the window.

"What good are you?!" Sarah screamed again. "Tell me!" A sailor looked at her oddly as he passed by.

Rab didn't come back for two days and when he did, he was so drunk he didn't remember who she was. She sat cross-legged with her back to the fire, looking at him. He was maudlin, sloppy tears running down his bearded cheeks. Every time he raised the half-empty bottle by its neck, she watched



his Adam's apple bob. After a while, he fell over and snored, the rest of the whiskey running through the cracks in the floor. Sarah put the blanket over him and sat beside him. "It's all right, Rab. I'll take care of you now." She couldn't do it the way Mama did, but she would find some way.

Rain drummed against the window. She put out her tin cans and blocked her mind to everything but the sound of the drops plinking into them, making music in the cold, dull room.

She was glad, she told herself, really glad. No one would come knocking at the door. No one would bother them anymore.

Rab was guilt-ridden in the morning. He cried again. "I gotta keep my promise to Mae, else she won't rest in peace." He held his head in his hands and peered at her with bloodshot, sad eyes. "What am I going to do with you, kid? I need a drink. Bad." He looked in the cupboards and found nothing but a can of beans. He opened them and ate half, leaving the rest for her. "I'm going out awhile and think things through. Gotta talk to a few friends. Maybe they can help."

Sarah lay on the bed and pressed Mama's pillow against her face, comforting herself with the lingering scent of her mother. She waited for Rab to come back. As the hours passed, the trembling started deep inside her.

It was cold; snow was falling. She lit the fire and ate the beans. Shivering, she dragged a blanket from the bed and wrapped herself in it. She sat as close to the grate as she could.

The sun was going down, and the silence was like death. Everything slowed inside her and she thought if she closed her eyes and relaxed, she could stop breathing and die. She tried to concentrate on that, but she heard a man's voice, talking and excited. It was Rab.

"You'll be pleased. I swear. She's a good kid. Looks like Mae. Pretty. Real pretty. And smart."

She was relieved when he opened the door. He wasn't drunk, just lightly in his cups, his eyes bright and merry. He was smiling for the first time in weeks. "Everything's going to be fine now, kid," he said and brought another man into the shack with him.

The stranger was built like the stevedores on the pier, and his eyes were hard. He looked at her and she drew back. "Stand up," Rab said, helping

her. “This gent’s come to meet you. He works for a man who wants to adopt a little girl.”

Sarah didn’t know what Rab was talking about, but she knew she didn’t like the man who had come with him. He came toward her, and she tried to move behind Rab, but Rab held her in front of him. The stranger cupped her chin and lifted her face, turning it from side to side to study her. When he let go, he took up a handful of her blonde hair and rubbed it between his fingers.

“Nice,” he said and smiled. “Real nice. He’ll like this one.”

Her heart drummed wildly. She looked up at Rab, but he sensed nothing wrong.

“She looks like her mother,” Rab said, his voice breaking.

“She’s thin and dirty.”

“We’re poor,” Rab said piteously.

Taking some bills from his pocket, the man peeled off two and handed them to Rab. “Clean her up and get her some decent clothes. Then bring her here.” He gave him an address and left.

Rab whooped. “Things’re lookin’ up for you, kid,” he said, grinning. “Didn’t I promise your mama I’d take good care of you?” He took her hand and walked her quickly to another shack several blocks away. A woman in a thin wrapper answered his knock. Her curly brown hair fell about her pale shoulders and she had circles beneath her hazel eyes.

“I need your help, Stella.” After he explained all, she frowned and chewed on her lower lip.

“You sure about this, Rab? You weren’t just drunk, were you? It don’t sound right somehow. Didn’t he give a name or nothin’?”

“I didn’t ask him, but I know who he works for. Radley told me. The gent who wants to adopt her is rich as Midas and way up in government.”

“Then why’s he looking on the docks for a daughter?”

“It don’t matter, does it? It’s the best chance she’s got, and I promised Mae.” His voice trembled with tears.

Stella looked at him sadly. “Don’t cry, Rab. I’ll fix the kid up real pretty. You go get yourself a drink and come back later. She’ll be all ready for you.” He went, and Stella rummaged through her wardrobe until she found some-

thing soft and pink. "I'll be right back," she said and took a bucket to get water. When she came back, she warmed some in a pot. "Now, you wash good. No man wants a dirty girl." Sarah did what she was told, fear growing in her belly.

Stella washed her hair with the rest of the water. "You've the prettiest hair I ever did see. It's just like sunshine. And you've got pretty blue eyes, too."

The woman altered the pink shirtwaist and braided Sarah's hair with blue ribbons. Sarah remembered Mama doing the same thing when they lived at the country cottage. Or had she dreamed that time? Stella put pink paint on Sarah's cold cheeks and lips and rubbed it in gently. "You're so pale. Don't be scared, sweetie. Who'd hurt a pretty little angel like you?"

Rab came back the next day, drunk and no coins jingling in his pocket. His eyes were wide, blank, and full of confused pain. "Hello, kid. I guess this is it, huh?"

She hugged him tightly. "Don't send me away, Rab. Keep me with you. You be my father."

"Yeah? And what am I going to do with a kid, huh?" He pried her loose and looked down at her with a sad smile. "I got enough problems."

"You won't have to do anything. I can take care of myself. I can take care of you."

"How you gonna do that? You ain't old enough to do nothing worth money. You going to steal like me? No. You move in with Money-Pockets and have the good life. Now, come on."

They walked a long time. It was getting dark. Sarah was afraid of the shadows and clung tightly to Rab's hand. They passed saloons filled with loud music and shouting and singing. They went down streets lined with houses, big fancy houses, the likes of which she had never seen before. The lit windows looked like great glowing eyes following her every movement. She didn't belong, and they knew it and wanted her gone. Shivering, Sarah hung close to Rab's side as he asked men directions, showing them the slip of wrinkled paper.

Sarah's legs ached and her stomach growled. Rab stopped and looked up at the big house flanked by others that were similar. "Ain't this a grand place!" He stared in awe.

No flowers. Stone. Cold. Dark. Sarah was too exhausted to care and sat down on the bottom step, miserable, wishing she were back in the shack by the docks with the smell of the sea drifting in on the tide.

“Come on, kid. Couple more steps and you’re home,” Rab said, pulling her up. She stared fearfully at the huge brass lion head that was on the door. Rab took the ring that was held in its bared fangs and banged it against the door. “Fancy,” he said.

A man in a dark suit opened the door and gave Rab a derisive lookover. Rab handed him the paper before he could close the door in his face. The man studied it, then opened the door wide enough for them to enter. “This way,” he said coolly.

Inside it was warm and smelled sweet. A wide room opened before Sarah, and in it lay a glorious flowered carpet on a shining wood floor. Above were sparkling jewel lights. She had never seen anything so fine. *Heaven must be something like this*, she thought wonderingly.

A red-haired woman with dark eyes and a full, red mouth came to greet them. She was wearing a beautiful black dress with jet beads winking over her shoulders and full breasts. She looked down at Sarah and frowned slightly. Her eyes flashed at Rab and then met Sarah’s again more gently. She bent and extended her hand. “My name is Sally. What’s yours, honey?”

Sarah just looked at her and drew back behind Rab.

“She’s shy,” Rab said apologetically. “Don’t mind her.”

Sally straightened and looked at him with hard eyes. “You sure you know what you’re doing, mister?”

“Sure, I know. This is some place you got here, ma’am. Nothing like the dump we’ve been living in.”

“Up the stairs to your right,” Sally said in a dull voice. “First door on the left. Wait there.” She reached out before Rab took two steps and stopped him. “Unless you’re smart and take my advice. Leave now. Take her home.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“You won’t see her again after tonight.”

He shrugged. “She ain’t mine anyway. Is he here? The big man, I mean.”

“He will be shortly, and you’ll keep your mouth shut if you’ve any sense in your head.”

Rab headed for the stairs. Sarah wanted to run back out the door, but he had a firm hold on her hand. She looked back and saw the woman in black watching her. She had a pained look on her face.

Everything in the upstairs room was big: the mahogany highboy, the red brick fireplace, the teak desk, the brass bed. A white marble washstand stood in the corner, along with a brass towel rack polished so fine it looked like real gold. All the lamps had jeweled tassels, and the drapes on the windows were bloodred. They were closed tightly so no one could see in. Or out.

“Sit over there and rest, kid,” Rab said, patting her back and pointing toward a wing chair. It was exactly like the one Mama used to sit in at the country cottage. Sarah’s heart suddenly started to race. Could it be the same one?

What if her father had been sorry? What if he had been looking for Mama and her all this time and had found out where she was and what had happened? What if he was sorry about all the awful things he had said and wanted her after all? Her heart beat faster and faster as hope and dreams built of desperation and fear filled her.

Rab went to a table near the window. “Will you look at this.” He ran his fingers lovingly over a set of crystal bottles. He took the stopper out of one and sniffed the amber fluid inside. “Oh, my...” With a sigh, he brought it to his lips and tipped it. Gulping half of what was inside, he wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. “Closest I’ll ever get to heaven.” He took the stopper from another and poured a little into the one from which he had drunk. He held them up to see if they were even again, then put them down carefully and fitted the stoppers in place.

He opened the armoire and went through it, tucking something in his pocket. Then he went to the desk and went through it as well, tucking more things into his pockets.

Sarah heard faint laughter. Her eyes were heavy and she rested her head against the wing of the chair. When would her father come? Rab went back to the glass bottles and drank from another two.

“Enjoying my brandy?” came a deep, low voice.

Sarah glanced up in surprise. She stared, her heart sinking. It wasn’t her

father at all. It was a tall, dark stranger. His eyes glittered, and she thought she had never seen a face so cold, nor so handsome. He was dressed all in black and wore a shiny hat.

Rab shoved a stopper back into the crystal decanter and put it back on the silver tray. "Haven't had anything so fine in a long time," he said. Sarah noticed how his face paled as the man stared at him with those strange eyes. Rab cleared his throat and shifted. He seemed nervous.

The man took off his hat and placed it on the desk. Then he took off his gloves and dropped them into it.

Sarah was so fascinated by the man that she failed at first to notice the other man standing just behind him. She blinked in surprise. It was the same man who had come to the docks and looked her over. She pressed back against the chair. The second man was watching Rab, and his eyes reminded her of the rats in the alley behind the shack. She looked at the fine gentleman and found him looking at her with a faint smile. But somehow that smile didn't make her feel better. It made her insides shiver. Why was he looking at her like that, as though he were hungry and she was something he wanted to eat?

"What's her name?" he asked without taking his eyes from her.

Rab's mouth opened slightly and he looked dumbfounded. "I dunno." He gave an uneasy, befuddled laugh, clearly drunk.

"What did her mother call her?" the man said dryly.

"Darlin'...but you can call her whatever you like."

The man gave a short, humorless laugh and dismissed Rab with a contemptuous glance. He studied Sarah carefully. She was scared, so scared she couldn't move when he walked toward her. He smiled again when he stopped, his eyes shining oddly. He took a wad of bills from his pants pocket and removed a gold clip. He counted out several and held them out to Rab without even looking at him.

Rab took them eagerly, counting them again before he stuffed them into his pocket. "Thank you, sir. Oh, my, when old Radley told me it was you lookin' for a daughter, I couldn't believe the kid's luck. And she ain't had much in her life, I can tell you." He rattled on, saying the gentleman's name twice, too drunk and too stupid to see the change in the man's face.

But Sarah saw.

He was furious, but more than that. He looked...Sarah shivered again. She wasn't sure how he looked, but it wasn't good. She glanced at Rab, feeling panic build inside her again. He rambled on, trying to flatter and cajole the man standing before her, not even noticing the subtle signal being passed from the gentleman to the man behind Rab. A scream tore at Sarah's throat, but it didn't come out. It couldn't. Her voice was as frozen in terror as the rest of her. She watched in horror as Rab kept talking. He didn't stop until the black cord was looped around his neck. His eyes bugged. Choking, he clawed at his neck, drawing his own blood with his dirty fingernails.

Sarah bolted from her chair and ran to the door. She twisted and pulled at the knob trying to escape, but the door wouldn't open. She heard Rab strangling, his feet kicking and scraping as he struggled. She pounded her fists on the wood and screamed.

A hard hand clamped over her mouth and yanked her away from the door. She kicked and bit and fought—and gained absolutely nothing. The man's body was stone, and he caught hold of her arms and held them pinned painfully tight with one hand while the other clamped harder over her mouth.

Rab was silent.

"Carry him out of here," the man holding her said, and she got a glimpse of Rab on the floor, the black cord still around his neck, his face grotesquely distorted. The man who had come to the shack unloosed the cord and slipped it back into his pocket. Pulling Rab up, he draped him over his shoulder.

"Everyone will think he's drunk."

"Before you dump him in the river, go through his pockets and bring back whatever he stole from me," the cold voice said from above her.

"Yes, sir."

Sarah heard the door open and close.

When the man let go of her, she ran to the farthest corner of the room and cowered there. He stood in the middle of the room looking at her for a long time. Then he went to the marble stand and poured water into the porcelain bowl. He wrung out a white cloth and walked toward her. She

pressed back as far as she could. He hunkered down and grasped her chin.

“You’re much too pretty for paint,” he said and began to wash her face.

She shuddered violently at his touch. She looked at the place where Rab had lain. The man tipped her chin back.

“I don’t think that drunken lout was your father. You don’t look anything like him, and there’s intelligence in your eyes.” He finished washing the rouge from her cheeks and mouth and tossed the cloth aside. “Look at me, little one.”

When Sarah did, her heart pounded until her whole body shook with terror.

He held her face so she couldn’t look away. “As long as you do exactly what I tell you to do, we’re going to get along fine.” He smiled faintly and stroked her cheek, his eyes glowing strangely. “What’s your name?”

Sarah couldn’t answer.

He touched her hair, her throat, her arm. “It doesn’t matter. I think I’m going to call you Angel.” Straightening, he took her hand. “Come on now, Angel. I have things to teach you.” He lifted her and sat her on the big bed. “You can call me Duke, when you get your tongue back.” He took off his black silk coat. “Which you will. Shortly.” He smiled again as he removed his tie and slowly began to unbutton his shirt.

And by morning, Sarah knew that Cleo had told her God’s truth about everything.



# One

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*But strength alone, though of the Muses born,  
Is like a fallen angel: trees uptorn,  
Darkness, and worms, and shrouds, and sepulchers  
Delight it; for it feeds upon the burrs  
And thorns of life; forgetting the great end  
Of poesy, that it should be a friend  
To soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man.*

K E A T S

C A L I F O R N I A , 1 8 5 0

Angel pushed the canvas flap back just enough to look out at the mud street. She shivered in the cold afternoon air, that carried with it the stench of disenchantment.

Pair-a-Dice lay in the Mother Lode of California. It was the worst place she could have imagined, a shanty town of golden dreams built out of rotting sails from abandoned ships; a camp inhabited by outcasts and aristocrats, the displaced and dispossessed, the once-pampered and now-profane. Canvas-roofed bars and gambling houses lined mean streets ruled by unmasked depravity and greed, loneliness and grand illusions. Pair-a-Dice was wild jubilation. It wed black despair with fear and the foul taste of failure.

Smiling cynically, Angel saw on one corner a man preaching salvation while on the other his brother, hat in hand, fleeced the godforsaken. Everywhere she looked, there were desperate men, exiled from home and family, seeking escape from the purgatory forged by their own decaying hopes for a future.

These same fools called her a Cyprian and sought solace where they were most assured of finding none—from her. They drew lots for her favors, four

ounces of gold, payable in advance to the Duchess, madam of the Palace, the tent brothel where she lived. Any comer could have Angel for one half hour. Her own meager percentage would be kept under lock and key and guarded by a woman-hating giant named Magowan. As for the rest—those sad unfortunates who lacked the price to sample her talents—they stood knee-deep in a sea of mud called Main Street, waiting for a chance glimpse of “the Angel.” And she lived a year in a month in this place that was unfit for anything but business. When would it end? How had all her desperate plans brought her here, to this horrible place of dirt and broken dreams?

“No more right now,” the Duchess was saying, ushering several men away. “I know you’ve been waiting, but Angel’s tired, and you want her best, don’t you?” Men complained and threatened, pleaded and bargained, but the Duchess knew when Angel had reached the limit of her endurance. “She needs a rest. Come back this evening. Drinks on the house.”

Relieved that they were gone, Angel let go of the tent flap and went back to lie on the rumpled bed. She stared bleakly at the canvas ceiling. The Duchess had announced this morning at breakfast that the new building was almost finished and the girls would be moving in tomorrow. Angel was ready to have four walls around her again. At least then the cold night wind would not blow in on her through splits in the rotting sailcloth. She hadn’t thought how much four walls meant to her when she paid passage on a barkentine destined for California. Then, all she had been thinking was escape. All she had seen was her chance for freedom. The mirage had dissolved soon enough when she reached the gangplank and learned she was one of three women aboard a ship with 120 vigorous young men, all of whom had nothing on their minds but adventure. The two hard-eyed prostitutes set to work right away, but Angel had tried to stay in her cabin. Within a fortnight, she saw clearly that she had one simple choice: go back to being a prostitute or be raped. What did it really matter anyway? What else did she know? She might as well line her pockets with gold like the others. Maybe then, just maybe, with enough money she could buy freedom.

She survived the rough seas, the foul-tasting lobsouse and hushama-grundy, the cramped quarters, and lack of dignity and decency in the hope that she would have enough money by the time she reached the shores of

California to start a new life. Then, amid the excitement of docking, the final blow was struck.

The two other prostitutes set upon her in her cabin. By the time she regained consciousness, they were ashore with all her money and every possession she owned. All that was left to her was the clothes on her back. What was worse, not even one sailor remained aboard to row her ashore.

Beaten and numb with confusion, she sat huddled in the bow of the ship for two days before scavengers came. When they finished taking what they wanted from the deserted ship and her, they brought her to the dock. It was raining hard, and while they argued and divided their booty, she simply walked away.

She wandered for several days, hiding her face and hair beneath a soiled blanket one of the men had given her. She was hungry; she was cold; and she was resigned. Freedom was a dream.

She made her way by working Portsmouth Square until the Duchess, a woman well past her prime but possessed of a shrewd mind for business, found her and talked her into heading for the gold country.

“I’ve got four other girls, a Frenchie from Paris, a Celestial Ah Toy sold me, and two girls who look like they came off an empty potato boat from Ireland. A little food will fatten ’em up. Ah, but now, *you*. First time I saw you, I thought *there’s* a girl who can get rich with the right management. A girl with your beauty could make her fortune up there in the gold camps. Those young miners will take the gold out of the stream and fight each other to put it right in your hand.”

On an agreement that Angel would turn over eighty percent of her earnings, the Duchess promised to see that she was protected from bodily harm. “And I’ll see you have the best clothing, food, and lodgings available.”

Angel found the irony laughable. She had fled from Duke and fallen into the hands of Duchess. Just her luck.

For all her seeming benevolence, Duchess was a greedy tyrant. Angel knew she collected bribes to fix the lots, while not a speck of that gold dust found its way into the girls’ pouches. The tips left for services well-rendered were divided according to the original agreement. Mai Ling, Ah Toy’s Celestial slave girl, tried to hide her gold once, and Magowan—with his

cruel smile and ham-sized hands—was sent in to “have a talk with her.”

Angel hated her life. She hated the Duchess. She hated Magowan. She hated her own wretched helplessness. Most of all she hated the men for their relentless quest for pleasure. She gave them her body but not a particle more. Maybe there wasn't any more. She didn't know. And that didn't seem to matter to any of the men. All they saw was her beauty, a flawless veil wrapped around a frozen heart, and they were enthralled. They looked into her angel eyes and were lost.

She was not fooled by their endless declarations of love. They wanted her in the same way they wanted the gold in the streams. They lusted for her. They fought for the chance to be with her. They scrambled, grappled, gambled, and grabbed—and everything they had was spent without thought or consideration. They paid to become enslaved. She gave them what they thought was heaven and consigned them to hell.

What did it matter? She had nothing left. She didn't care. An even stronger force than the hatred that feasted on her was the weariness that sucked her soul dry. At eighteen, she was tired of living and resigned to the fact that nothing would ever change. She wondered why she had even been born. For this, she supposed. Take it or leave it. God's truth. And the only way to leave it was to kill herself. Every time she faced that fact, every time she had the chance, her courage failed.

Her only friend was a tired old harlot named Lucky, who was running to fat because of her thirst for brandy. Yet even Lucky knew nothing of where Angel had come from or been, or what had happened to make her the way she was. The other prostitutes thought of her as invulnerable. They all wondered about her, but they never asked questions. Angel made it clearly understood from the beginning that the past was sacred ground no one walked over. Except for Lucky, dumb-drunk Lucky for whom Angel held a fondness.

Lucky spent her off time deep in her cups. “You gotta have plans, Angel. You gotta hope for something in this world.”

“Hope for what?”

“You can't get by any other way.”

“I get by just fine.”

“How?”

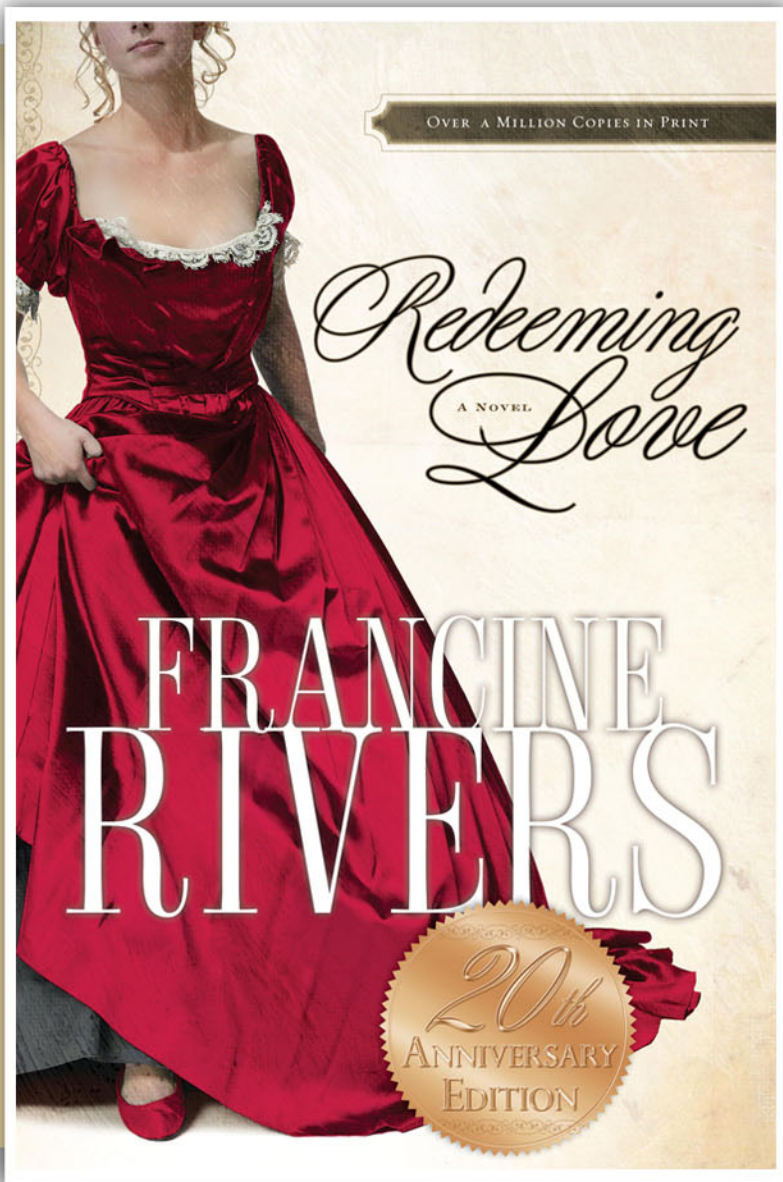
“I don’t look back, and I don’t look forward.”

“What about *now*? You gotta think about now, Angel.”

Angel smiled faintly and brushed her long, golden hair. “Now doesn’t exist.”

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