

Chapter 1

The pain! That terrible, relentless, unbearable pain! It clawed at my insides and seemingly wrenched my heart from my chest. Wracking and ceaseless, it engulfed my every waking moment and I knew I could not endure it for much longer.

Not knowing was agony, but the finality of knowing was much, much worse. I sank further and further into a bottomless pit, yet I could not summon sufficient strength to pull myself out.

My only escape was not to think at all, not to care, not to feel. Just to wallow in that numbing nothingness where I did not hear, I did not talk and I did not function. I knew I was losing my mind but, somehow, it was a blessing.

-oOo-

Two weeks passed.

My father's persistence finally dragged me back from that darkest of places, entreating me over and over with his kindly, quiet words.

'Come, Adam, you have to pull yourself together for the sake of your boys.'

His words initially came to me as through a great fog, but were insistent like the drumming of rain on a tin roof. Not really there at first, they gradually took on form and meaning. His arms gently held me and willed me back from the abyss and its blessed oblivion.

It was so hard. I struggled against him. God, how I struggled! It was so much easier in that nothingness. Yet, looking back, I could never thank him enough for his persistence. Gradually I took note of his words and of my surroundings.

My small boys were there, standing either side of me with their tear-wet cheeks and frightened eyes. I sat mute for a moment simply staring through them, then they too took on form and meaning. I enfolded them in my arms, their need so obvious and their warm, living presence striking a deep chord inside my soul.

We stayed locked together for what seemed like hours, each of us lost to our own grief.

Slowly my gaze focused upon our living room, the part of the house where we had shared so much. Sarah was everywhere I looked.

I could hear her soft voice and her lilting laughter. I could feel her love. There she was by the kitchen range cooking supper. I could see her sitting quietly by the fire mending the boys' shirts or serving at the table. Always smiling, always happy. Ours was a good home, full of love and nurture. My tortured eyes wandered reluctantly to our bedroom door. Most of all she was in there, in our bedroom, in our bed. Where our children had been conceived and

born. And where I now lay all alone every night. That was the worst. Fresh tears stung my eyes.

Yet sitting there holding my two young sons, I knew that somehow I had to come to terms with my loss. Our loss. It was their loss too. Though seemingly an impossible task, I had to try. My father was right. My boys needed me and I had to do this for them. I must. I was their father - all they had left now that their mother and baby sister were gone...

The news that their ship had foundered had been slow to reach me. Sarah and Rosie had sailed to England on the *Brechin Castle* last November from Adelaide. I had waved them off with a cheer I did not feel, not wanting them to go, but unable to stand in their way. I knew Sarah missed home and her family far more than I. She fervently wanted to see her parents again and show them Rosie, our baby daughter. So I had agreed. It was only to be for nine months. Sarah had it all worked out.

With great enthusiasm she had organized the trip. We would all sail to Adelaide together to see her brother. From there she would take Rosie and continue to England while I returned home with Jack and Mark. After all, I had our hotel to run here and she reasoned I would need to come back to Sydney. She calculated she would return by next August. That was her plan. I had hated waving her ship goodbye, the days without her stretching endlessly ahead.

Directly after her departure, I returned to her brother's farm at Angaston, a day's cart ride north of Adelaide. I had promised to give him a further week's help with his grape vine planting before taking a ship to Melbourne with our boys. From there, I would have preferred to continue straight back to Sydney but Jack was insistent that we spend some time with the children of Maddy Markham, one of the young women I had met eight years previously on a voyage out from England. Because Jack and Mark had neither cousins nor close companions among our friends in Sydney, I reluctantly acquiesced to his pleas. Consequently, we spent a week in that new settlement on Port Phillip Bay.

My hesitancy to tarry in Melbourne was in part due to a certain awkwardness I felt around Maddy's twin sister, Joey. I had sailed to England briefly on family business in 1839 and, during my return voyage to Sydney, had allowed my personal needs to override my good sense on one occasion. While the ship was in port in Rio de Janeiro, I had lain with Joey for a night. Afterwards I suffered a great deal of remorse and determined never again to jeopardise the love I felt for Sarah by allowing myself any such indulgence.

However, regardless of my unease, the week in Melbourne passed seamlessly. Jack and Mark thoroughly enjoyed their time at Yarra House with Maddy's children. Her oldest girl, Kit, put me in mind of Jack, as she shares his curly black hair and flashing green eyes. Jack was able to join her at school each day and the two soon became inseparable. Mark played well with Maddy's two younger girls, Emma and Grace, and these three spent much of their

time keeping the baby, Joe, amused. Joey thankfully kept away for much of the week, only joining us for a picnic day out at Sandridge.

Afterwards we took our booked passage home, the boys most reluctant to leave their new friends. Nevertheless it was time we were back in Sydney. I needed to check on my hotel and the boys needed to go back to school. At least Jack did. Mark was not due to begin until later in the year. All told, we had been away from home for eight weeks and, soon after our arrival, we slipped back into our usual routine. Even though I was lonely, everything went on as normal until June.

My first inkling that something was gravely wrong was an innocent note, arriving by ship from Sarah's father in Kent. Delivered to me on 5 June, it was dated 3 March, and the letter asked if there had been a change in plans as he had expected Sarah and Rosie to have been with them by the end of February.

His missive bore no hint of real concern. He believed either there had been a problem causing a delay of his daughter's ship or that Sarah had changed her plans and taken passage on a later vessel.

But I knew at once that something was awfully wrong. I had already received a cheery letter from Sarah posted in Rio. The sailing was unexpectedly smooth and she and little Rosie were in the best of health and looking forward to a joyful reunion with her family.

Immediately a feeling of dread filled me and I could hardly breathe with the anxiety of not knowing - fearing the worst, but hoping and praying that all was well. Perhaps the ship was simply becalmed somewhere or, if it had actually foundered, the passengers had been rescued or washed ashore. Perhaps they were stranded somewhere, far from civilisation. If – God forbid - there had been a shipwreck, I prayed that they had somehow survived. Anything, anything at all except their deaths. I began prowling the Sydney docks, waiting for further word from an incoming ship and praying ceaselessly and earnestly to a God I had long ago all but forsaken.

The final blow fell some two weeks later with the news brought by a ship lately arrived into Circular Wharf. The *Brechin Castle* had foundered on the Helwick Bank, close to the Worms Head of the Bristol Channel and there were no survivors. Sarah and Rosie had been so close to home! Due to dock at Swansea, the ship was very nearly there.

Apart from this official news, on the same vessel there was a second letter from Sarah's father, filled with grief over the loss of their beloved daughter and granddaughter.

The following day, the *Sydney Gazette* ran an article about the tragedy and numbly I read the details. It was thought that the ship's master, John Baxter, may have mistaken a recently-placed lightship for the light of Mumbles and turned to port into Swansea Bay, so putting his ship onto the Helwick sands. The lightship was a recent addition to the coast and

Baxter would have been unaware of its existence, for it had not been there when he left for Australia some twelve months before. Ironically, the *Brechin Castle's* papers and a large quantity of wool had washed ashore soon after the disaster and, unlike the passengers and crew, most of the newspapers and letters from Australia were rescued, dried out and sent on to their intended destinations. My letters to my grandparents were likely among them. How meaningless for them now, in the face of our devastating loss, was that trivial news written so many months before.

The report that the bodies of a seaman and a small child had been washed ashore was even harder to bear. Could that small child have been my Rosie? I had no way of knowing. That she could be lying in an unmarked grave was further agony. Moreover, of the remaining twenty-six souls, there was not a trace. My poor Sarah! My darling, the love of my life, gone. Gone forever.

The first two weeks after I had the news passed in a blur. Aware of no one but myself, I wallowed in my grief. Yet, by the end of it, my father had succeeded in making me see my responsibility to Jack and Mark. When I gazed into their young eyes, I actually grasped their suffering and my heart went out to them. They were still so small and innocent and they had lost their beloved mother and their baby sister. We cried together, more tears than before. They knew little of the tragedy, only that their mother and baby sister were drowned. I gently explained as best I could that they had gone to heaven to be with Jesus and were safe. They were probably at this minute looking down on us. I explained that we could hold them close in our hearts whenever we thought of them. Jack asked if we could talk to them and I nodded.

'How can we do it, Papa?'

'Just hold your hands together like this, as if you are praying, son. You may chat to your mother as if she were right here.'

Jack glanced up at me before closing his eyes.

'Mama, we miss you so much. And little Rosie too. But Papa has told us that you are in a special place and that you are very happy there. So do not worry too much about us. We will be all right and we will care for Papa for you.'

Jack opened his eyes and peeked up at me. I smiled at him through my tears and hugged him close. Mark too. Somehow, I vowed to get through this, if only for them.

Over the next few weeks I tried, I really did. Yet my heart was not in it. Jack reluctantly returned to school and I tried to keep busy with Mark and the hotel. However, as I had an excellent manager, there was little for me to do at work. And since our housekeeper, Sally, kept the house spotless, all I could do was wander aimlessly between the hotel and the house, with Mark usually by my side. My thoughts were never far from what I had lost.

Eventually I forced myself to confront the future and acknowledge my need to get away. I realised that I would never be able to function properly again while everything here reminded me of Sarah. I had to leave, at least for a time. Leave the house, and the hotel... but the boys? I was not sure I could leave them. Nevertheless, I knew that I needed to go away somewhere and heal. My mind began searching through various options.

It was obvious my father was too old to take on the responsibility of two small boys. I could not even ask him. Nor could I approach my brother Noah to take over their care. His wife, Emily, had made it exceedingly plain on many occasions that she had no liking or interest in children. I mulled over this dilemma for several days before it suddenly struck me that I could leave them with Maddy Markham for a time. She had told me how much she adored children and I was certain she would be agreeable to caring for an extra two. And Jack and Mark would love it there. It would help their healing. I wrote to her immediately.

On receiving her affirmative reply, I voiced my tentative plan to the boys and made light of my leaving them. They listened to all I said and their excitement at the idea of a prolonged holiday with Mrs Markham's children tempered my intended absence. I did not dwell on it. It was enough to see this first glimmer of happiness in them. Yet when I came to discuss booking a passage to Melbourne, their terrified eyes informed me that such a course of action would be extremely unwise. Nor did I have any inclination to travel thus. It was at this moment that I first entertained the notion of travelling overland, in the footsteps of Hume and Hovell. Knowing that their epic journey to Port Phillip had occurred some twenty-three years previously, I naively believed that the route by now would be well established and that we would have little difficulty in reaching our destination in safety. In only one instance was I to be proven correct.

My father and brother were not enamoured of my plan. Perhaps they could see pitfalls that I refused to contemplate. Yet they agreed to help in whatever ways they could. My father willingly concurred to oversee the smooth running of my hotel in my absence while Noah volunteered to find tenants for our cottage and to help Sally find an alternate placement. Naturally, I provided her with an excellent reference.

I spent the next few days procuring the equipment and provisions I believed we would need for our journey, as well as purchasing three sturdy, quiet horses to join my own strong gelding. From the little I could gather from acquaintances in Sydney, two packhorses would be sufficient and the boys could ride together on the third horse. If this combination presented problems, I could split our belongings three ways and the boys could ride separately. Although I needed to carry a certain quantity of food, a seasoned traveller assured me that the many inns and hostelries now operating along the route would provide us with sustenance and shelter on most evenings.

Knowing little of what lay ahead, I took his proffered advice and purchased from a storekeeper in town a sturdy canvas tent, a tarpaulin, a hammer, an axe, a water bag, a pan

and a billycan, and a flint with matches and three oiled canvas cloaks. Into our saddlebags went rice, flour, salt, sugar and tea along with a side of bacon and some salted pork. These were my preparations.

All was in readiness by the end of July and we took our leave of Sydney on a cold, dry morning.