

# Prologue

Ithan, Pennsylvania

1906

Jeannie Brand stood before the Missus and wondered at the rare curiosity of her being called up from the scullery at eleven on a fine autumn morning. Odd she should be called up at any time at all.

It was only the second time she had seen the inside of the drawing room. It was the first time ever she had been spoken to by the Missus. The old lady dealt only with Uncle Kenny. And it was Uncle Kenny who had rushed into the canhouse where Jeannie was crimping tops onto jars of stewed apple and called in an amazed voice, 'Jean, the Missus wishes to speak to you.'

He held out his hands, as perplexed as she at the sudden strangeness of the request, but he knew that the Missus had begun to take queer fancies in the past months. He had seen Sullivan the lawyer's trap outside the big house three times since the start of October.

Now he was troubled that the child he had brought over from his family in Fife a year past had been called so sudden and unto-ward. Not much happened at the big house that the Missus didn't discuss with Kenny. But the old lady seemed to know things. Things about the servants and the works and the comings and goings of the village that no soul could've told her.

Kenny stopped for a moment and looked at his niece. She was tall, taller than he, with the same bright flashing eyes and sharp

temper as his mother. Only last week the girl had wrestled and punched a big Welsh woman after they had words in the bakery line. ‘She certainly don’t act like no Scotch lady, Mr Ken,’ said Trapper Dan White as he told Kenny of the scene that unfolded before him while he waited atop the gig as Jeannie ran the morning messages.

And the girl sang so as she moved about the house. She had a sweet voice and she sang the songs of Rabbie Burns and it was a pleasure to hear for Kenny. It reminded him of the tiny village perched on a hill overlooking the Forth where he grew in the years before he came to America, where the men worked the pits and the women scoured and bleached linen in the fields. The girl’s voice was warm and delicate as a summer shower, but Kenny fretted that it annoyed the Missus when it wafted through the lower corridors to the parlour above.

‘I only hope she has had no word of your disgraceful behaviour at the bakery Tuesday past,’ he grumbled at Jeannie as they hurried up the back stair, she swatting at the dust and apple flakes on her apron. ‘Or you’re vexing her with your warbling songs all the hours of the day.’

‘She’ll no’ have an idea of the bakery wifie, Kenny . . . how would she?’

‘You don’t know her, lassie, and it’s my reputation at stake. I vouched for you and got you here, remember that.’ He shoved her towards the drawing-room door saying, ‘God help you if she’s displeased, and you don’t mention I know about the rammy at the bakery line.’

Jeannie knocked and heard the low gruff voice from within call, ‘Come on.’

The Missus was seated by the window. The bright morning sun from behind rendered her a silhouette with a fine slim neck and

hair pinned in a tight bun. Jeannie stepped into the room and made a clumsy curtsy. 'You wished to see me, Missus,' she said quietly.

The old lady turned and her face was in black shadow. 'Come closer, girl,' she said and Jeannie moved towards her.

'Here and take me hands,' said the Missus. Jeannie wanted to shudder as she lightly clasped the two gnarled and twisted things. They shone like polished mahogany and each was cut with thousands of tiny lines yet they seemed to weigh nothing, as light and insubstantial as goose feathers. The knuckles were jagged and ridged like a miniature mountain range, and from beneath the stretched toffee-brown skin the old grey bone jutted and shone. Holding the old woman's hands, Jeannie's smooth white fingers were like spring blossom settled on a midden.

The Missus said, 'These are all I have ever had, girl.'

Jeannie tried to smile and said, 'Yes, Missus.'

The Missus said, 'These are a pretty pair, child. Mine were like these once a long time ago. Mine were me fate and me fortune.'

Jeannie looked into the old woman's face; her eyes were the fearsome dark green of a deep mill pond. She tried to think and hear that voice. What was that voice? That queer way of speaking the Missus had. It was not Scots, nor Irish, nor Welsh. It was not American, nor had it the zees and zeds of the Germans or the Dutch. There was no lilt and music like the Italians nor the guttural shudder of the Jews. There was none of the drawl and laughter she heard in the speech of the Negroes, nor the clipped and assured chatter of the English.

The Missus closed her eyes and held her head back and said, nodding slightly, 'I seen you, Jeannie Brand, walloping the big wench in the bakery line.'

Jeannie flushed and twisted, but the Missus was laughing, her thin body shaking with a delighted wheezing.

‘She got what-for, dint she? You remind me of a fair and lovely wench I knew long back. Long long back.’

‘I apologise, Missus. I have a temper, I do. But our Kenny knows nothing of it. The lassie was braiding me for being Scots and I saw red. I am so sorry for any trouble I have brought you, Missus.’

The Missus’s smile showed good white teeth and she patted Jeannie’s hand. ‘Big fat thing, weren’t she?’

Emboldened by the mischievous smile on the old lady’s face, Jeannie said, ‘She was, aye, Missus, great fat cruel mouth on her. The vicious things she said, Missus . . .’

‘Well, it’s as well you wiped it for her, wench. I expect you are fast with your fists. You’ve a fair reach on ya.’

Jeannie was puzzled for a second. The old lady said, ‘Ya did no wrong. A woman has to fight sometimes. It’s as well ya know how.’

Then the old lady leaned forward and fixed Jeannie with her dark green eyes. The morning sun was hot in the room and dust motes sparkled in the air. ‘What are your people?’ she said.

‘My father was a miner, Missus. He was killed two years past when the shafts flooded. My mother died the year after of fever and so too my wee sister. That’s why Kenny sent for me. And many thanks to you, Missus, for letting me come.’

‘Kenny is too good a man to leave in me foundry and if you are his blood then you must be a good un too. And so sweet and pretty, you do me old eyes good just being about the place. And I hear your songs too, child.’

Jeannie put her hand to her mouth. ‘I apologise. I shall quieten if it vexes you, Missus. Where I come from we sing all the time.’

‘Don’t you never apologise for poetry, young wench. And never apologise for Mr Burns. He is the loveliest of all, and his poor heart so badly broken. I fancy it was a pretty Scotch lassie just like you as wronged him, Jeannie Brand.’

The girl tried to smile but she was baffled by the old lady's strange talk and was glad when the Missus shifted and held out her arm and said, 'Help me to the chair. I am sore with sitting here.'

The girl took the Missus by the arm and supported her as she edged across the room. Her tiny frame felt as weightless as her gnarled hands and she seemed to float as she took Jeannie's forearm to be guided to the chair next to the fire. There was a heavy dark-oak cabinet with a shining glass front. And as the older woman settled like an April snowflake Jeannie glanced at the cabinet. There she saw no knick knacks or china, no Meissen or Staffordshire. Instead, at the centre of the only shelf, placed carefully on a fine linen doily, was a small bronze ring. And next to it a scrap of faded red ribbon. The things were dwarfed by the span and volume of the glass shelf they sat upon and hung as if suspended in mid-air.

The old lady was smiling still as the girl's gaze returned to her. The window end of the quiet room glowed gold in the slanting sunbeams and was suddenly airy and full of dancing light.

The Missus said, 'Go and call Kenny to fetch us some tea. I should like to have a talk with you.'

And as Jeannie moved towards the door the old woman said, aloud and to the general air of the room, 'I am the last one. I have nobody left. They are just old songs now.'

## I

When I was a babby I spoke Black Country and I dint speak much neither. Then nor now. They said I was a moody mare and I was always scowling and I walked slow and heavy and leaning like I was a Punch barge-hauling coal. I still walk like that, but slow now because of the years and sore bones and puffy swelling knuckles where once they were sharp and cut fast.

We sometime spoke Romi on the road but that's all gone now too. All gone from my voice and my head. All knocked out and spilled on the lanes and alehouses and farefields. But there are still songs I got from all over in my head and they come in waves sometimes, sometimes a word or a sound or the way an American says a word I know like he is Black Country, and the words tumble back and the tunes and the sounds and the voices I heard that shouted and sang when I was a little wench and got offered up and bought by Billy Perry. The thud of the barge on the wharfside. The hiss of the rope on the bridge corner. The old Shire's soft clopping on the path. My mammy crying the day I walked down into the fair holding our Tommy's hand.

Before that walk, in the years my people roamed and wandered them lanes and fields in that country all over, from the towns and villages to the moor top and woodlings, we watched the copses going for pit props and railway beds and the rivers getting the bends taken out. There were the pit heaps and brickworks and the canals snaking through the green pastures like hedges do in proper country. And new brick buildings going up by the basin where the

canals all met the river and it was all sludge when they had the new locks closed and men were bricking up the culverts and run-offs. And hauling and placing blocks of red sandstone. They dug holes in the ground for coal and clay and sand and they burned lime in stone kilns that smoked and glowed all night.

I can still see the red earth path we walked down to the fair the summer after Big Tom dropped down dead in the stamping rain trying to lever the vardo out of a blackwater ditch with my brothers Tommy and Tass.

When he toppled like a cut tree, white as milk and scratching at his chest, they put up a wailing and bawling and me and Mammy and Benny and Mercy and Charity peered out from under the canvas we was holding over our heads.

The vardo skewed and pitched up at the back, and Cobble the pony was bucking and straining at the halter, scared he was going into the ditch with the cart. Tommy and Tass were clinging on the pole end they had wedged under the front wheels and Big Tom was lying face down with the rain smacking into his back.

I got sight that night in the rain when Big Tom died. I knew he was dead and I knew his soul was hovering on us, and the pony's fear and pulling white-eyed from the pit was like our fear of the pit and all of us pulling white-eyed all our lives.

I got quieter after that, and the quieter I got the more I saw. I learned to hover and float over and see what was what, and drift like down to flutter and spin above the world.

Mammy told me all about pitching by a holly tree, welcoming wrens and robins, itches in your hands and nose, and looking for a white horse in the morning.

That happened in the April, and time we came to the fair in September the leaves on the hawthorn hedges that lined that lane were all greying from their summer green and in places turning

red brown and the hawse hung in clusters and were darkening from deep green to deep red and all the sparrows going yampy for them. Linnets' wings were burring in the sun and the last martins were swooping low fore they ventured away into the wide sky.

The oak leaves in the wood above that path were yellowing and brimming with green acorns and Mammy said it meant a hard winter coming, all that acorns and fruit and brambles. I saw the underside of them leaves with morning sunlight glowing through them as I looked up, tugging little bawling Charity by the hand as we all walked behind Mammy to the fair, even though we had no horse to sell nor baskets nor ribbons nor stitching nor nothing.

But looking up at the sun glowing through the leaves, and hearing the scutter of sparrow wings, I saw the underside of everything and I knew I was going somewhere that day like them martins knew they was destined for a journey.

Somewhere to the underside where sun glowed through.

We stopped and ate all the brambles because we were starving by then and Mammy waited, though she took none herself and she was thin except for her big belly where a new babby was growing.

Below the lane in that small valley all along the canalsides lines of barges and craft were moored as far as the eye could see, their chimney pipes were blowing smoke in the bright morning air from stoves where they were boiling the tea, and outside the lockkeeper's lodge above the basin was a stout wench spreading white cloth across a table to sell cakes and buns to the bargeys as they walked to the fair.

There were big Shire cross pulling horses tied in the field next to the canal, each with a rope tethered to a steel stake, and a boy was filling their troughs from a leather bucket dipped in the little stream that ran down from the hill, and the water sparkled in the sun so you had to wince looking at it. It was rising bright, though in the east a sliver of moon still showed, and as we walked on and down



we saw all the men gathered and lighting their pipes by a big new rick near the open gate of the field all decked with flags and bunting.

There were brewery men there rolling barrels from the dray and the Clydesdales stamping and snorting, and two boys in white brewery coats unfolding wooden trestles, and a big fat wench in a bright white pinafore overseeing the set-up was calling and cursing at the boys as they scurried to set each table and put out bales for seats.

The field was all fresh cut for hay and there was a rope on iron poles that marked the sale ring and a little stage of new yellow sawn pine for the auctioneer. At the far end there was all the horses and ponies, all kinds and all sizes and all for selling and trading come the day. They were fenced behind wooden pales and hazel hurdles and little stable lads were brushing manes and picking hooves.

I knew horses back then and there were Welsh ponies and cobs, Shires and Clydesdales, Connemaras from Ireland, Dales and Fells, Cleveland and huge honey-hued Suffolk Punches. There were big barge horses and wagon ponies and little riding cobs for the gentry's children and ponies for pits and ponies for ploughing and scraggy old ponies for the knacker men.

And all below us the wide road that ran towards the locks and the basin from the town was filling full with a swelling stream of sellers and pedlars, milk girls and tobacco hawkers, handcarts all stacked with apples and pears, ribbon sellers and potmen, loads of firewood on wagons pulled by teams, a fishman and an iceman moving great blocks wrapped in sack on carts, bright wagons covered in painted castles and flowers and hauled on by tough little ponies, vardos and show wagons with green canvas tops, fancy-ware dealers, a ripe strawberry cart, clowns and puppeteers carrying striped fit-ups and painted poles, a dog cart that trundled heavily weighed by the cider kegs. There were soldiers in bright scarlet coats and white sashes, and cavalrymen with feathers in their

helmets, ladies in fine full skirts and farm girls in muslin pinnies. Girls in Sunday best with pretty bonnets and men in tricorns and toppers bobbing in the crowd seething into that meadow. I watched a lady stop and pull out a silver box and sniff fine spices up her nose to stop the stink of it all, the horse shit and sweaty lads and open kegs and steam and smoke and men pissing in the hedges.

And in the dip that ran along the stream a ring was roped for the fisticuff bouts that came after the sales and trading were done. There were tents for the fighters and their men and already there were purses on the stakes where they were betting on the finish of it. Even before it began they were thinking about the ending of it and putting their money out to get odds and terms off the bookmen.

On a flat wagon in the far corner there was a forge, already fired and smoking, and the smithy in his leather apron emptying sacks of coal and working the bellows so clouds of light grey smoke wafted across the meadow and we smelled it even where we were looking down, lined up next to our mammy.

There was Charity, Mercy and me and Tass and Benny and Tommy and my mammy who was called Keziah Loveridge and we were Loveridges after our daddy Big Tom Loveridge and we were Romi and we travelled in a vardo and gorgers called us gypsies and tinkers and piker-men because we lived in a vardo and never stopped and never stayed and we worked on Sundays and weren't allowed in churches nor chapels.

We girls, Charity, Mercy and me, wore no bonnets and the boys wore no caps and each of us walked that dusty lane barefoot. Tass, next down from Tommy, wore only his nightshirt and britches, and Benny next down from him wore the cord britches and canvas jerkin he had slept in the night before. Me and Mercy and Charity wore long grey woollen dresses with aprons tied at the back. We walked in line in order of age behind Mammy, and though she

was a widow only five months, in two there would be another babby for her to clothe and feed. Tommy and Tass both carried bundles on their backs with all the goods we had, tied away in the canvas sheets we used to string a shelter between trees at night.

We were all hungry last months, and wandering we were always hungry, crying hungry and swelling-belly hungry and Mercy cried all the nights long. The babby Charity dint cry and that was worse, meant she was sad, sick and fading.

The last food we ate was two days before when a farmer's wife gave us porridge and new apples as we all sat on the verge opposite her gate. It was a big, grand farmhouse of red brick and a slate roof and a garden with a wall at the front where there were apple trees and the apples full and green and sweet. That wife took some pity on us, a line of Loveridges tramping up that road with no horse nor wagon, and, ignoring her husband's rule not to feed any tinkers or pikers, she brought a pot out to us, gave us a fresh bucket of water too, and we all had a new green apple picked that day.

My mammy had got used to beggary and taking food and shelter where it was offered since Big Tom had dropped down dead. And our old pony Cobble dropped down dead too a month later in the rain and wet while we all crammed under the tent and shivered. Poor old Cobble missed Big Tom, Mammy said. He pined away and died of horse fever after Big Tom went and we all pined too and Mammy cried at nights by the fire. We buried Big Tom outside the churchyard in Yaxley because we were not in the Church and we worked Sundays and the young curate said he couldn't be buried in consecrated ground. And we were so hungry we roasted old Cobble on the fire and he was right chewy.

We had a camp in a copse near Yaxley, and me and Mercy got three pennies a day for scaring birds off the peas and barley. Tommy and Tass worked pulling stones out of a field and they got a bob

a week, and we stayed there working and living in the camp until one night I knew there was bad coming in on us because I saw a crow as the sun went down, and then men with staves burst into our spinney and drove us all out. Tommy and Tass had their heads splitted by sticks and we left the big kettle and Big Tom's old shiny boots behind and we all ran into the night. That night I floated over like a bird and I sent vile curses down upon them men who stamped and spitted at us as they harried us from their copse.

Then we wandered the lanes. The spring and summer were dry and warm, which was as well, for all the coats and blankets we owned were in the old vardo, rotting away in the ditch where it killed Big Tom. There was no going back for them now. That vardo was cursed sure and certain as the trees changing.

We picked where we could find picking work, and Mammy stitched bags and blankets for fairs, and the boys pulled stones and dug ditches.

But by that September any coins Mammy had in her purse were gone and it would be winter soon enough and a new babby coming. We wandered raggle-taggle and camped and begged where there was water or shade from the sun. And we always stopped by holly or hawthorn.

We had come to this fair every year when Big Tom was alive. Mammy sold her stitched bags and blankets, and we ran around the sweet mowed meadow while Big Tom met men from other camps and talked horses and places where there was work to be had. We traded Cobble at the fair before I was born when Tommy and Tass were babbies and Mammy was carrying Benny. I wasn't even there then. I was the spark in Big Tom's eyeball and the grin on his big lovely face.

Mammy said Big Tom had fought fisticuffs at fairs fore we were born and he had once won a two guineas purse agin a lad from

Walsall who he knocked out cold after they had fought for an hour. He had a bite scar on his forearm like the big crescent moon.

So we had been every year for nine years to that day, and I was eldest girl next up from Mercy and Charity who was the babby then but not for long. I loved them all but I was a right moody mare in them days and I never spoke much and I watched things going on and waited fore I spoke or used my voice. But I could see what was coming for me.

Now we rounded the bend that led down to the basin and Mammy stopped and turned back to us. She held her hands up and we all straggled into a line: Tommy, Tass, Benny, me and Mercy and Charity.

We all stared down towards that colourful and moving mass of people swarming onto the farefield below. Now carriages drawn by horses were coming up the road below, one fine landau with liveried footman riding at the back and gentlemen on horseback following, and their beaver hats were slick in the sun like they'd been oiled.

And now Mammy said, 'We have risen so early and walked this dusty lane so far to this fair, with no horse or baskets or stitching to sell, and I have made sure Annie wore the cleanest and least mended dress and I washed her face this morning and smoothed her hair down. Oh, my little Annie, the quietest and most sombre of all, who sits alone in brooding silence while you others play and shout. And I know you others think she believes she is too high for us and wishes to be a lady. Oh, my Annie, who never smiles or laughs with your dark eyes, all old and knowing . . .'

And then she stopped talking and there were fat tears running down her cheek. She nodded to Tommy and he took my hand and said, 'Come on, girl.'

And he led me down to the fair. And Mammy called after him, 'Five guineas,' and then she looked away.