

Heaven Below

JOAN LEHMANN

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Chapter 1

“Saturday’s last whistle, thank the Lord Jesus Christ,” muttered Sean. He lowered his shovel to the ground as if it were made of lead. It had raised calluses on his hands for the past six days, but now it was his friend as he leaned the weight of his body against it like a crutch. It was only when he stopped that he realized his right shoulder ached down to his hand until it was numb. The last car he loaded with coal was headed out of the shaft and it seemed an eternity for the trolley to return to carry him out of the mine. The ceiling was too low to stand and he spent most of his day stooped over to avoid hitting his head. His legs quivered like jelly, too tired to carry him out on foot. Still grasping his shovel, he dropped to his knees to wait. Thank God another long week was over. He closed his eyes and wished he had wings to fly from that dark loathsome hole in the ground forever.

While he waited, the foreman’s words from Monday rang in his head. “Be thankful you’ve got a job,” he said. “The mines have been closing left and right even before Black Tuesday. But by the grace of God, ours is still running three years into this despicable Depression.”

Be thankful, he thought, trying to will it. But his joints creaked and his lungs were full of dust. At just twenty-four he had already put in ten years at one job or another, felt like twenty. The weeks got longer and

the wages got shorter. I should be thanking the boss all right, thanking him for making me an old man before my time, thought Sean.

At last, he and his crew climbed into the trolley dragging their shovels and picks behind them. No one uttered a word because they were too tired to speak, and anyway, there was nothing to say. The ride along the track rattled their bones. As they turned the corner, the screeching of the wheels on the rails was deafening. Finally, as they neared the entrance, Sean caught a glimpse of daylight. He climbed from the car and like an old man, gingerly straightened his spine. As he lifted his face, he raised his hand to his brow to shield his eyes from the sun. He put out the lamp on his cap and pulled it from his head. His blond wavy hair contrasted with the black smudge on his face. He hung his cap on the peg at the door and exited the shaft. With the warm sunlight, life returned to his weary body.

“Hey, Sean. Will you stop off for a *taste* with us before heading home?”

The voice awakened him from his stupor. It was Patrick Donley. Pat had worked next to Sean for the past three years. Their crew called them the Mick Twins, because of their ancestry and because they tried to match each other shovel for shovel. Neither minded the teasing. It was better than being called a Molly Maguire. People had a long memory in Pottsville. No one had forgotten about the blood shed a few years back and some still held a grudge against the Irish. Sean would love nothing better than to throw back a shot or two, but there was a little less in his envelope

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each week. At this rate, he couldn't afford to squander even a penny at a gin mill.

"I'll pass. I'm gonna cash out and go home to my girls."

Patrick stood and stared at Sean, not willing to take no for an answer.

"Next time," said Sean firmly.

Patrick gave in and caught up with the others.

Sean moved to the line at the spigot. First he washed the grime from his hands. Then he glanced up at the mirror. His light green eyes shown through the greasy soot he washed from his face. He passed the cake of soap to the man behind him before moving to the next line to collect his week's pay. As he listened for his name, he wondered when the Depression would end, when he would see a decent wage so he could buy land for a house...

"O'Connell?"

...and when he would see the ocean.

"O'Connell!"

"Here, sir."

"Here's your week's worth, son," said the paymaster as he slid an envelope under the window.

"Thank you, sir."

The paymaster nodded and called the next name. "Altschuler?"

Sean stepped to the side of the line and opened his envelope. He counted the cash and change. There was fifty cents less than last week. His heart sank.

Just then, another miner realized there was less in his envelope too. "What the hell is this? How I'm feeding seven children with this?" he bellowed at the paymaster

in his thick accent. His fists clenched as he stepped towards the window.

“Settle down, Kolinsky. You know I’ve got nothing to do with it. I got less this week too. We’re all on the same boat.”

“What boat? Must be Titanic. How do I get off?”

A few of the men snickered. But Kolinsky wasn’t joking and so the laughing quickly ceased. After a moment, the big Czech backed away from the window and it was a good thing too. He could have broken a few bones if he wanted. But he knew it was pointless to fight. Things were bad all over. He grumbled a curse word in his mother tongue as he thrust his pay into his pocket.

Sean folded over his cash and shoved it into his pocket too. He tossed his jacket over his shoulder, picked up his jelly-bucket and started his walk home. As he walked, a car crept up behind him. He jumped when the driver blew the horn. The fellows from work laughed at their prank when he startled.

“Give her a big kiss for me, Seany boy,” shouted Patrick.

“I’ll see you bright and early Monday morning,” Sean yelled over the roar of the engine.

“Bright and early, then.”

The car stirred a cloud of dust as it drove past. As Sean walked, his thoughts turned again to the sea. He longed to be near the water, the green Atlantic his Grandda remembered and of which he had only dreamed. He’d never seen a boat, not a real one. He’d seen barges in the canal loaded with coal and rowboats on the lake. But Sean had never seen a boat under sail or a steamer or sternwheeler. He had clipped photographs of boats

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from newspapers and magazines since he was a child. Someday I'm going to build a boat, he thought. Someday I'll own one. But first he had to make it to the sea. He had a plan to get there, *once*.

When he was eighteen he left home and headed east. He set out to see the ocean to build boats or work on boats or fish. It didn't matter. He just needed to be on the water. He left his steel mill town and made it half-way across Pennsylvania to Pottsville before he stopped for the night. He got a room at the inn and went downstairs for supper. A waitress came to the table. Sean's eyes widened as she came near. When she asked him what he wanted to eat, he couldn't speak. He couldn't move. She had long brown curls and eyes that matched. Her face was fair and her cheeks were like roses. She glowed as she stood before him. Sean was sure he had died and this woman was an angel in heaven speaking to him. She spoke once more. He watched her beautiful lips move, her voice was like a song. Still, he was dumb. Her patience grew thin and she walked away in anger. "Fine, I'll be back when you've made up your mind."

"Wait," he cried. "I'll only eat if you will join me."

"But I've got two more hours until I'm finished," she answered.

"Alright, then I'll wait."

He watched her every move, the way she floated from table to table. Her skirts swayed and her feet scarcely touched the ground. His heart quickened whenever she glanced his way. She couldn't believe he would wait for her. At long last, she brought roast beef and potatoes and sat across from him. When he held her hand, he forgot all about the ocean. He took the

first job he could get, as a laborer in the mines, shoveling five cars a day. Two weeks later, he asked the waitress to marry him and she did. Since then, six years had passed and he had still never seen a real boat, or the ocean for that matter. He was foiled by a pair of brown eyes. But how lovely those eyes are, he thought, and they're all mine. Sean never believed in love at first sight, until he saw Molly. He wouldn't have traded her for anything, not even the sea. Secretly, he still schemed to get there. When he had the chance, he whittled away on wooden toy boats and dreamed.

The couple rented half of a house from Molly's Aunt Abigail and Uncle Andrew, in Cressona, just outside Pottsville. Sean worried that he had yet to buy land. Saving money for their own place was impossible in those times but they needed more room for their little family. Their daughter was already five. She had curly brown hair and a fair face like her mother, but she had her father's *green* eyes. She was both of them and they were her world. But as happy as he was to have both his girls, he still wished for a boy. He longed for a son to teach what he'd learned and to pass on the family name—maybe even give him grandsons if he was lucky. Molly had been with child twice since Hannah, both were lost early on. But there was still time, plenty of time.

It was May and as he walked Sean took a deep breath of the country air. What a glorious day, he thought and what a shame he spent most of it underground. The trees were in full leaf and bright green. The sun felt good on his face. His step grew stronger when he neared his house. And though weary, his step got a bounce when he heard his curly girl's voice. With arms open wide,

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Hannah called to him, “Papa, Papa. I’m so glad you’re home.” She raced down the hill to meet him. She was a sight for his sore eyes in her little blue dress and hair ribbons to match. Her face beamed when his eyes met hers. “Not as happy as I am to be home, sweet pea.”

Sean dropped his jacket and lunch pail and bent down to wrap both arms around her. His clothes were thick with coal dust. The missus will have a fit, he thought. But Hannah didn’t care. Though his arms ached from another long week of shoveling, he lifted her off the ground just the same. She was as light as a feather to him and he swung her ’round and ’round until they were both dizzy. They laughed, happy to see each other. Sean buried his face in her sweet hair that shone in the bright sun. His eyes welled with water as he squeezed her tight and felt her little heart beat next to his. A week’s worth of misery was washed away by the touch of her hand. He kissed her tender cheek and lowered her feet to the ground.

“Hannah Jane O’Connell—why don’t you have shoes on your feet?” he pretended to scold her.

“It’s okay. Mama and I are working inside today.”

Her apron and dress were covered with flour and now, smudges of black soot.

“Really? Working in the kitchen today, are you?”

“Uh-huh. We’re making muffins.”

“Oh no. Are they the kind I like best, with cinnamon and sugar?”

“Yep.”

“Quick. Let’s go get one while they’re still warm.”

He gathered his jacket and lunch pail and raced her to the house.

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“Not so fast in those filthy clothes, Mr. O’Connell. The muffins are still in the oven. And anyway, they’re for tomorrow after church, for those of us who go to church.”

Poor Sean was foiled again, by the same pair of browns.

Molly’s face was red and wet with perspiration. Her apron was covered with flour, like Hannah’s. Next to the house, the wash waved on the line. Sean thought she was beautiful standing there smiling at him. He couldn’t wait to get his arms around her, too. As he reached for her, she gently shunned him with her hand.

“Before you change out of your work clothes, would you bring an armload of wood? The stove is getting low.”

“Of course, *my queen*,” said Sean with a wink to Hannah.

As Molly opened the door for him, the smell of fresh baked bread wafted to his nose. He inhaled deeply trying to taste the air. The bologna sandwich, apple and pint of milk he ate at noon were a distant memory. A pang of hunger hit his stomach and made him weak. His head began to spin. He bent over and leaned against his knees. The moment the nausea passed, the landlord, Molly’s Uncle Andrew came to his door.

“Today’s payday, ain’t it, boy? Rent’s due. I’d like to have my money now, if you don’t mind,” he said gruffly.

Sean’s fists clenched and he gritted his teeth lest foul words fly from his mouth. He struggled to keep from taking a swing at the man who taunted him. Just in time, Aunt Abby intervened.

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“My lord, Drew. Let the boy catch his breath. He just got home. He’s never missed a week. Let him get his supper.”

Andrew and Abigail Ashe. What a pair. Their voices sounded so much like Grandda’s, Sean often wondered if they all came over on the same boat from Dublin.

Molly came to live with Aunt Abby when she was fourteen. She taught Molly to cook and sew and helped out when Hannah was born. Molly was the daughter Abby never had and she adored Hannah like her own grandchild. When Sean showed her the latest ship he’d carved, she told him he’d make a fine boat builder. She even slipped gooseberry tarts into Sean’s lunch pail in summer.

Why did she settle for *Mr. Ashe*? He was the meanest-spirited man Sean had ever known. He complained about the weather, the food, the economy, even the President. Sean paid him rent, always on time. He split wood, carried water and mended his roof. Still he treated Sean like dirt under his shoes. Was Sean so different from him? Andrew labored in the coal mines, just like he did, for thirty years. Now that Andrew’s bones hurt too badly to work, the two lived on Abby’s piece work and the rent Sean gave him every week. Didn’t he remember how hard it was to work to feed a family, especially in tough times? Was it the pain in his joints that made him ornery, or was he just a son-of-a-bitch? Mister was as mean as Missus was nice.

“I’ve got your money right here, Mr. Ashe,” Sean said between his teeth.

He lowered the firewood to the floor and forced his grimy hands into his trouser pocket. Sean pulled out

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a wad of cash and passed it his way. Andrew tucked his walking stick under his arm and held out both hands for the money. He grinned as he wet his thumb on his tongue and counted every dollar. He turned on his heel and walked back to his side of the house without so much as a look. Sean felt his fists clench again. I can't stand the man, thought Sean. Sometimes I just wish a tree would fall on him or lightning would strike him. I don't need his taunting or his house for that matter. Every week Sean asked himself why he didn't spend his pay on three train tickets—to anywhere, to get out of that town to start a new life. They would have already gone if it weren't for the bond between Molly and Aunt Abby. Sean couldn't separate the two and little Hannah couldn't be happier. She was loved and doted on by two women. He decided long ago to tolerate this ingrate landlord and slave away in the mines until something better came along. He hoped it would come soon.