



## THE OVERHANG

Marlie and I lived at the Overhang, near the place where three roads met. One road went west to the Badlands. No one ever passed that way. It was the same with the road to the east – if you followed it you'd end up in the marshes, which stretched forever. Nobody went in that direction, and you'd never expect to see anyone coming from there. Only the road from Skerrick was used, and that was the one I watched, from high up on my ledge.

'Peat, get down. You won't make her come any faster by looking!'

I couldn't see my sister but I could hear her. She was in the yard below, putting hay in the bails and getting the buckets ready for milking.

'Come on,' she yelled. 'Come on, come on, come on...'  
She was calling the cows, but she was also calling me.

I ignored her and stared along the road, following it over the hills until it became a narrow track that disappeared into the valley where Skerrick lay. There was only one person who used the road and that was Wim, our auntie. She came up every month to bring us supplies and to collect the cheeses we made. Sometimes, if the weather was clear, I could see her as a tiny dot in the distance; then I'd know she would arrive in two days' time, walking slowly because she always carried a heavy

load – vegetables from her garden, flour, corn and lamp oil. Even with an empty pack, it would still take her at least four days to walk all the way from Skerrick.

Marlie and I longed for Wim's visits because she was the only person we saw. You might think it strange that two girls would live all by themselves up there at the Overhang, but that's the way it was. Our job was to look after the cattle. Every day we took them out to graze and every night we brought them back to the yard.

There were seven cows: Bella, Pem, Minka, Ellie, Creamy, Brown Cow and Skye. And each one had a calf except for Bella, who had the twins, Bright and Little Shy. Bright was my favourite even though he caused me a lot of trouble. He was brave and cheeky, and in the evenings when we locked the calves into the night cave, he was the one who always refused to come. Marlie lost patience with him but I thought it was funny the way he dug in his toes and wouldn't budge. Most nights Bella had to help. She'd walk right up to the entrance and pretend she was about to go in, even though she was much too wide to fit. Only then would Bright skip through. I'd have to close the gate behind him quickly before he changed his mind.

We separated the calves from the cows at night so we could milk in the morning. If the calves were on the cows all day and all night there wouldn't be any milk for us – not that it was really for us, it was for the people of Skerrick. We made the cheese for them.

Skerrick was the nearest settlement, the *only* settlement. You wouldn't call it a town, or even a village – it was just a scattering of huts with walls made of stone and roofs of

sod. None of the huts had windows, because there was nothing to see.

Most valleys lead somewhere – they open up into new country. But the valley where Skerrick lay – Bane Valley, it was called – ended in a steephead, a solid rock wall. The huts were built at the base of it and the sides of the valley were so steep that no sun ever reached there.

It was much better to live at the Overhang, even if it was just a rock shelter. At least there was a view. From the ledge I could see the entrance to the Bane Valley, and if I climbed higher up the escarpment I could see the sandy country out near the Boulders.

I would never have wanted to live in Skerrick even if I had have been allowed to, but Marlie would have gone back and lived there the next day if she could. She'd been born there – well, we both had, but she'd lived there for six years, and I'd only been there for a day.

'Peat, come down and help me!'

I took a last look at the road to Skerrick. The sun was in my eyes, so even if Wim was there I probably couldn't have seen her.

'Coming!'



## LUCK

I got down the same way I'd come up, through the hole at the back of the ledge. It was a narrow gap and it led into the night cave. I squeezed through, then dropped down onto the floor, pushing my way through the calves. Bright was standing in front of the gate blocking my path. Typical! I shoved past him and slipped out.

'Any sign of her?' Marlie handed me my bucket and stool.

I shook my head and sat down next to Bella. She was the lead cow and she always came in first.

'I don't know how Wim can bear to live in Skerrick,' I said, pressing my head into Bella's warm flank.

'Don't start that again. You've never even seen the place.'

'It's miserable. The sun never shines there.'

'It does. I can remember playing in the sun in front of our hut.' Marlie flicked her long hair from her eyes and set her stool down next to Creamy.

'It must have only been for two minutes at midday when the sun was right overhead.'

Bella shifted her weight and gave a low *moo* to show she agreed with me. Bright bawled a reply. He was restless, eager to be out with his mother. He bawled again and all the other calves joined in.

'You're wrong, Peat.' Marlie raised her voice above the noise. 'It was often sunny. Ma would sit in the doorway in the sun, shelling peas.'

'She never shelled peas. Peas wouldn't grow in Skerrick.'

'How would you know? You were only a baby. You're *still* a baby.'

I didn't reply. The calves settled down and the only sound was the milk squirting into my bucket.

My mother had made that bucket. She'd made a lot of things around the Overhang. I didn't remember her, but knew she must have been clever and capable – you could see it in everything she'd left us – this bucket, the spoons she'd carved out of blackwood, and the gate made of woven birch sticks that was strong enough to keep the calves in and the cows out. She'd made my wool dress too, and my trousers, and the felt vest I never took off. They'd belonged to Marlie until she grew out of them. And my mother had made the little cow charm that Marlie wore around her neck. It was carved from horn and it was my sister's most precious thing. She said it brought her good luck.

My mother hadn't been too lucky herself – or perhaps it was me who'd brought her bad luck. The trouble had started when I was born. There was a big man who lived in Skerrick. His name was Alban Bane and he was the boss of everything – the land, the huts, the people. He was especially the boss of my mother, because he was married to her. On the day I was born he took one look at me lying in my mother's arms and a fury ran through him. My hair was not brown, like his, or all the other people of Skerrick's. It was red. And my eyes were a different

colour too, not dark like everyone else's. My eyes were even different from each other – one was brown and one was green.

When he saw me, Alban had strode outside and rang the bell. It was a huge iron bell mounted on scaffolding beside his hut, and it was rung whenever there was news to be announced, good or bad. Although I didn't think there would ever have been any good news in Skerrick – it wasn't that sort of place. Anyway, on my birth day, Alban rang the bell and told everyone that the baby girl was not his, but rather a child from the Badlands, a bastard child, and that my mother, sister and I would be leaving Skerrick that very day, never to return.

My mother took the only road out of the settlement – the track that led north, to the back country under the escarpment, where the cattle were kept. She knew about the Overhang because she and Wim had spent summers there when they were young. She knew where the water was and how to find food. She could make soup from nettle and hogweed. She knew where the mushrooms would come up and the places she was most likely to find mealy grubs and ground nuts. And the cows meant that every day we could have milk and cheese.

Marlie remembered the walk. She said our mother carried me in a sling on her back and that her arms were full of the few things she'd been able to collect and tie up in a blanket before Alban Bane had pushed us out of the family hut. Whoever was looking after the cows must have been very pleased to see us, because they headed back to the settlement as soon as we arrived.

Marlie said those cow hands had left the Overhang in

a terrible mess. She helped our mother clean it up. The first thing they did was collect fresh bracken to spread on the sleeping ledge, which was behind the cooking bench. Then they put straw on top, to make a soft bed. When that was done they built a rock wall between the living area and the yard, to keep the cows out. Before that, if the cows were in the yard and the weather was rough they would come right in under the ledge to get out of the rain. My mother also put a big stone on either side of the wall to help us climb over. She must have been strong then, to move stones that size.

I finished milking Bella and put my stool next to Pem. She was a strawberry-coloured cow, like her calf, Jiffi. Wim had told me that Pem was our best milker, because her milk was full of cream. She said our mother had made beautiful cheese from Pem's milk.

Our mother was a very good cheesemaker. The cows had liked her, so they gave her extra milk, and sometimes she had as many as six cheeses stored on the shelf against the back wall of the Overhang, lined up in the dark like little golden moons.

'Peas *did* grow in Skerrick,' Marlie said. 'Everything grew there – peas, corn, apples. And it still does. Ask Wim.'

I didn't answer. There was no point in asking Wim about Skerrick. She would just shake her head and change the subject. 'Don't worry about it, Peat,' she would sigh. 'It's no place for you.' Then sometimes she would add, 'It's no place for anyone, really.'