

From the best selling author of *Daughter of the Murray*
And *Where the Murray River Runs*

Flora's Gold

Previously unpublished prequel to
The Widow of Ballarat

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Miss Flora Doyle's Laundry

Goldfields Ballarat, Her Majesty's Colony of Victoria,

Saturday 2nd December, 1854.

Flora Doyle folded her arms. A scorching afternoon sun beat down on her head, and the tubs of laundry boiling behind her hissed and bubbled over crackling flames.

'It's not like I can get ye clothes washed and dried any quicker with all this lot comin' at me as if there's no tomorrow,' she seethed. The line of dirty, hungover men grew as she stood there. They all carried bundles of their laundry for her—stinking shirts and trousers.

The miner at the front of the line, his head nearly disappearing behind his heap of clothes, said, 'Miz Flora, we just come from another of Mr Lalor's meetin's about how we need our rights.' Enthusiastic nods and murmurs of agreement followed. 'And now we need our clean shirts for Sundee best at church tomorrow.'

She snorted and waved an angry arm over her head. 'More of ye giving' me that rubbish about Mr Lalor's meetin'. He can come and do yer laundry fer ye Sundee best instead o' firing up your lame brains about ye rights. I pay me thirty shillings a month for the blasted licence, too, along with all of ye but I don't burn the thing. And I don't get Sat'dy afternoon off, either, so where are my rights?'

The line went quiet. Then a raucous voice shouted, 'Yer don't need none, yer a woman.' Jeers and crows went up, and so did dust as the man was knocked to the ground amid yells of 'shut yer mouth,' and 'who'll do the wash, now, yer mung?'

'I'll get 'em for meself,' Flora hurled back at him.

A short man from the middle of the line stuck his head out. 'Ye don't need the likes of us old diggers tellin' ye what's what, Flora Doyle. Push come to shove, them troopers no match fer you, our black-haired Irisher.'

A loud, jovial cheer roused, and when that died away, she heard chortles and snorting. She shook her head looking over the lot of them. 'Where's the man amongst ye not bolstered by the rum keg?'

Another piped up, holding his laundry. 'We stand for all of us, Miz Flora. For you women-folk, too. We're all under the new flag, since Bakery Hill, weeks ago.'

'But d'ye know what it is ye're doing?'

Exasperated she shook her head.

‘Course we do. They still come with the licence hunts even after the uproar on Bakery Hill. And they fired on us at the Gravel Pits last Thursd’y, on women and children, too. Ain’t legal.’

‘Would ye know legal if it bit your backside, Thomas Reardon?’ she stormed. ‘They already fired on ye, and ye’re goading them up again.’

‘We’re standin’ to defend, Flora, not attack.’

Some shuffled their feet. Tempers were high. But fear shrouded the diggings, and fingers were trigger-happy, nervous. There’d been an eerie quiet over the last few days, and some believed the storm was coming.

One man, with bushy brows and a scraggly beard caked with dirt, stepped outside the line. He dumped his shirts and a cloud of flies arose gracefully as one, and resettled. He pointed a finger, and said, ‘I’m fightin’ for whoever stands here at these diggin’s—man, woman, and child—and whoever sits behind them barricades on Eureka Lead under that flag, resistin’ those what wanna keep us from our rights. We got rights. *Liberty* is what Mr Lalor yelled and that’s what we’s fightin’ for.’ He looked about, furtive, all the same.

A rumble went up. A fine speech, they agreed. Following it a stocky man stepped up, his battered hat jammed on his head, a ragged bag under one arm. ‘Fer crissakes, Flora, this is a line-up fer ye laundry service, not the bloody front line. It’s Sat’dy, a half day orf, and tomorrow is the rest day. We gotta look decent for Sundee.’

Shoving back stray dark hair as it escaped her cap, she stood with hands on her hips. ‘A half day *orf* is it, Mickey Watson? Half day *orf* for who? Look at this lot ye’ve brought me.’

‘It’s ye paid service, woman,’ he groused. ‘Ye do laundry.’

‘Aye, ’tis, and I do. And fer clean clothes pushed in ahead of my schedule, it’s now a pound and *two shillings* a load.’

The collective groan went up, but nobody moved away.

‘And if yer want Sunday lunch tomorrow,’ she continued, her voice louder. ‘It’ll now be another shillin’ in the pot for me mam to do the taties.’ She pointed to her mother.

The line of men looked over at a serene older woman sitting on a log by Flora’s campfire, stitching a colourless length of fabric. Mumbles of greetings were directed to her.

‘Miz Josie.’ Hats off.

‘Miz Josie.’ Heads nodding.

‘Miz Doyle.’ Chins lifted.

Josie Doyle inclined her bonneted head regally in their direction, as would Queen Victoria to her faithful subjects.

A voice called out. 'Nice to see the lad's shirt is shapin' up, Miz Josie.'

Josie proudly held the ragged fabric high and a cheer went up for it. It wasn't a lad's shirt at all, as everyone knew, but that's what she called it. Flora always made sure her mother had something to stitch whether Josie's mind was off with the *faeries*, or not.

'Mad ol' duck,' one of the younger men muttered. Someone's hard elbow knocked the wind out of the him.

Josie went back to her stitches, her smile still in place. Flora well knew that the young fella who'd insulted her mother would find that the day after next, after he'd pulled on his clean pants and soon needed to take a piss, that his flies had been stitched up.

She marched backed to her laundry tubs. 'Right y'are, then. For laundry, I'm taking only the first five of ye. Ye'll all pay up now afore I touch any of ye stinking rags. Those who want lunch tomorrow, leave a shillin' with me mam.'

A surge of men dumped piles of sweat stained, sour smelling shirts and rough woven trousers into heaps on her flat canvas mat.

'First five she said, damn ye,' someone snarled when another pushed in ahead. A scuffle broke out. Arms swung, shirts flew, three bodies bit the dust and tumbled, fighting and swearing.

Flora rolled her eyes.

'Miz Flora.' It was the man who'd delivered the fine speech earlier. He stepped around the flailing bodies. 'There's some low types getting' around, scaring womenfolk, manhandling, stealing. Pillagin'. You know what I mean? Takin' guns from lone women, to arm those men what don't have any. This ain't a good time for women to be in the thick of it.'

Flora stared at him. 'What do you mean, Geordie, not a good time for women to be in the thick of it? Where'd you think us women would be?'

The three on the ground grunted and rolled and kicked as the others urged them on. Flora shook her head. Josie chortled as she sat by the campfire, her fingers nary missing a stitch.

Geordie now rolled his hands in front of him, and his rough voice shook a little. 'If there's trouble,' he looked over his shoulder at the folderol on the ground, '*Real* trouble, like fightin' with guns and such, it brings out the worst in even good men.'

She scoffed, with bravado not derision. 'In even good men, you say? Worst is worst, good men or not. And I'm half a mile from that Eureka Lead barricade. All I got is ye dirty laundry. I got no guns.' She skipped aside as the roiling bodies skewed her way.

‘Lass, it’s that there’d be no law and order to it, afterwards. I been to war, it makes men do bad things. I seen the soldiers take their bayonets and stick the wounded over and over. Then they come for the womenfolk.’

Everyone knew what that meant. Her guts chilled.

Bumped hard by the skirmish, he was knocked sideways. Growling, he steadied himself before levelling a swift boot at a fat backside. ‘We’re all at boiling point, Miz Flora. And it’s already spillin’ over.’ He pointed at the scuffle that erupted with more huffs and yells and snorts.

The bodies rolled towards her campfire, bounced and sparks flew when they landed in a heap on top of it. Josie flinched, stared, whipped the lad’s shirt up high, away from any harm.

Flora shouted at the others, ‘Fer God’s sakes, you lot. Get these *eejits* off the fire. I’ve no mind to be peelin’ charred skin off their behinds, and I don’t want the stench of burned flesh up me nose.’

Accidents were rife on the fields. A person burned by fire had a dire ending, and everyone knew the smell of it.

Men jumped to drag their comrades to safety, others stamped out the live coals that came with them. The three staggered to their feet, still air punching at each other, and at those who’d grabbed them. Then, out of puff, they stopped, brushed themselves down. Grumbling, they snatched up their belongings and stomped off.

‘Nothin’ will happen on a Sunday, Geordie,’ she said quickly.

‘Aye,’ he said, acknowledging the church day. He looked at his rolling hands and stilled them. ‘Maybe.’

Another man stepped towards her, his lean features gaunt, his sunken eyes, which might have once been blue, were filmy. He was old before his time, maybe thirty and five. It was Jimmy Pocket, an American, a regular laundry customer of hers. ‘There’s some of us, Miz Flora, like me an’ Geordie that know what Mr Lalor and his friends have started is no laughin’ matter. From the governor down to them troopers—word is they’ll fire at us, squash us like bugs. There’s talk there’s spies amongst us. It could be bad, Flora.’

She stared at the man, thinking hard. Lewis, her beau until the recent past, had said he’d be there at the barricade. He’d said he’d be with his American mates, and Mr Lalor, and that Canadian fella, Captain Ross. He’d be with all of them, tonight, standing for rights under the new blue Australian flag with its proud white cross and its glorious stars. *Tonight*. Her breath fell short. Was this true what Jimmy said? Was it going to be a fight to the death and not, like before, only a determined protest from the miners?

No, surely not. Just belligerence, just chest puffin’ and—

Lewis. She didn't want him courting her any longer, but she didn't want any harm to come to him, either. Should she warn him? He was a fool to be sat up there, with the word out that the troopers were—

No. He was a grown man. They all were. She only had to protect herself and her ma. She leaned in, only a little shaky, and said, 'Jimmy, I'll be all right.' Then to the much-reduced line up of laundry-seekers, she said, 'A pound and two shillings, if you please. And I'm takin' no nuggets, mind you.'

Another groan but coins were tossed onto the canvas, each at the foot of their pile of laundry. Coins clinked into a pannikin in the dirt near Josie, from those who wanted a decent meal the following day.

The men filed away, down the hill.

'An' how ye goin' to get through all that, me darlin'?' Josie asked from the fire, her speedy fingers hooking the stitches along a seam of fabric.

'Nell said she was comin' today, so she can help. Thought she'd have been here by now.' Flora straightened and stretched her back, watching as the last of her customers wandered off.

Over their heads and down the hill, she could see a woman making her way towards the laundry. It looked like it was her friend, Nell Amberton. Before she'd married, she'd been Nell Thomas, a laundress from a camp a little beyond. The person seemed stooped and trudged hesitantly. Flora squinted. It was Nell, but there was something wrong.

Taking a few paces past her campfire and down the gently sloping hill, Flora stood again, and watched. Nell took her time picking her way past the ramshackle line of tatty tents, mould stained from last rains. She stood motionless when screeching children, playing bushrangers, sped past. Safe to resume, she trudged over small mullock heaps—discarded dirt from the sieves. She skirted cooking fires and the sleeping bodies prone on the dirt where men had fallen after last night's revelry.

Men seemed to revel even when terror and uncertainty was biting at their heels, perhaps especially so. Flora shrugged to herself. Some things would never change.

Nell stopped, looked skywards and took a few small breaths. That was when Flora saw the state of her face.

Oh no, not again...

Flora ran the few yards down to her. 'Nell, Nell. Give me your arm.'

'I'm all right,' Nell said and let Flora take her elbow. She braced against her friend a moment. 'I've got to keep moving or it's worse.'

'Would that ye'd never married the bastard,' Flora spat, then slipped her hand up to Nell's face and turned it to the sunlight. 'So. He did this more than a couple of days

ago.’ The black and blue of Nell’s eye was fading into a dirty yellow-greenish smudge, but still pronounced over the swelling.

As they moved towards Flora’s camp. Nell sucked air between her teeth and halted abruptly, catching her breath.

‘And whack ye in the ribs, too, did he?’ Flora’s teeth clenched.

‘He had a go, just once, last night.’ Nell’s fair hair hung in strings, the ribbon loosely secured. ‘I can’t lift one arm properly, couldn’t do my hair, so I look a bit more of a mess than I really am.’

‘And his bloody excuse this time? Though it isn’t like he needs one.’

‘I told him I might be with child again. I hoped it would improve things, not—’

‘And are ye with child?’ Flora’s blood was boiling that Nell’s husband would harm her, and her pregnant at that. The man was an abomination. Nothing would stop him now, not with everyone’s mind on the troubles. What was one woman’s cry for help against all of that?

The diggings were a cauldron waiting for the tinder beneath to ignite. No one was interested in a man punching his wife, that was private business, men said. Oh yes, Andrew Amberton must think he was a big man, all right. If Flora had been a man, she’d have taken him down a peg or two. And she’d told Lewis, who was Andrew’s nephew, just what she’d thought of him for allowing his uncle to continue to be so violent. Why, if she hadn’t—

Nell puffed out a breath, shook her head. ‘Hard to say if I am, at the moment.’ She pressed a hand to her belly, low down. ‘I might have got confused after last time...’

‘Aye. Understandable.’ Flora stopped a minute. ‘But I hope ye’re not, Nell. I hope ye find someone to help you make sure ye never get with child again. Not with him.’

Nell gave her a wan smile. ‘Let’s get to that seat alongside your ma.’

At the campfire, Flora helped Nell settle on the log beside Josie. The old lady reached over and patted Nell’s hand. ‘There, there, dearie.’

Nell dropped her other hand over Josie’s. ‘Just need a breather after that walk.’ When she looked up, her eyes widened at the piles of dirty clothes near the laundry tubs. ‘Looks like we have our work for today.’

Flora bent over the firepit, moved the billy over the flames. ‘Aye, me perhaps, not you.’

‘I’ll be all right after a minute.’

Grumbling at that, Flora picked up a lidded tin can, pried it open and threw a handful of tea leaves into the billy. ‘Not sure why *we’re* goin’ to be workin’ when it appears the whole blasted field is takin’ the afternoon off.’

‘Orf,’ Josie said and snickered. Flora laughed.

Nell sighed tiredly. ‘Seems there’s been a few days like that, already. The miners have downed tools, shops have closed, supplies have stopped coming in. Everyone thinks something bad is going to happen soon.’

Flora snorted. ‘But the lemonade tents are doing just fine.’ Lemonade really was sold in those tents, but mainly it was illicit grog coming out of the lemonade barrels. ‘Since the fire destroyed Bentley’s hotel, there’s been more rowdiness than before. More shots being fired off, drunks demolishing tents, you name it.’

‘Let’s have the tea and we’ll get to that lot,’ Nell said and lifted her chin towards the piles of dirty clothes. ‘Once we’re done, I can go off home.’

Flora looked at her. ‘Ye’d be safer here on the fields than at home with him, Nell Thomas.’

Nell held out her hand for the pannikin of tea. ‘You might be right. But you’re forgetting, my own father is on these fields somewhere, and just as dangerous as my husband.’

Josie rocked back and forth, nodding her head. ‘That be Alfred Thomas. Nasty fungus on me damper, that one. The blight on me taties. A bleedin’ tosspot.’

Flora winced. ‘Ma!’

Nell gave a shout of laughter, then held onto her middle. ‘It hurts to laugh, Flora, but that’s just what I need. Come on, let’s get to it, so I can earn me some money.’

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Nell refused to be walked home some hours later. It was a couple of miles back to her husband’s house in the town. ‘It will do me good, and any time away from that place is time well spent. I’m not going to roll into a ball and hide. I’ll be as independent of him as I can,’ she said, then scoffed at herself. ‘As long as I’m able to walk.’

Flora worried that Nell ribs had been cracked or broken, and, that if she was indeed with child, either circumstance would not fare well for mother, or for babe if there was one.

If only Lewis would do something about his uncle. If only he would stand up and put the man in his place. Flora sighed. She knew Lewis had hoped for an inheritance and he’d most likely not do anything to disrupt that. *Men. Money.*

‘I fear for you, Nell.’

‘Don’t. Look after yourself, and your ma.’ Nell pressed her arm. ‘I’ll see you soon, if I can. Goodbye, now,’ she said and began her slow walk home.

When Flora looked back to her laundry, five loads of wet men’s clothes hung on the haphazardly placed clothesline. When the original post holes for her lines had been dug, they’d yielded her a golden crop—nuggets had been found in them. So other holes that had been dug were not in a straight line. Posts had been dropped quickly into those

barren holes, and lines hastily strung, higgledy-piggledly. Thankfully, the blistering heat remaining in the day would have the laundry dried off before too long.

Dusk gave way to the night, still warm, barely a breeze. At nightfall, men were walking home from up Eureka Lead way. Those who lived nearby took the clearest footway through the motley shanty-town of tents, right by Flora's camp. As she sat at her fire, the low voices of men going by told her an ominous story.

As two men tramped past, one of them called out in a hoarse whisper for her to douse her fire. 'We've heard the sentries are ordered to shoot if there's any lights, missus.'

Only mildly alarmed, for surely they didn't mean the sentries would shoot at people down this way—she was a good distance from the government Camp—she did kick dirt over the low flames. No point attracting trouble, even if it was a long way from her.

As she sat, chin in her hand, listening to her mother's soft snores coming from the tent behind, more snippets of conversation drifted across from the men as they picked their way down the slope.

'...Heard there was five hundred of 'em come into the barracks on foot, just yesty...'

'...Drunks are sleepin' it off or singin' like fools. What hope if the troopers charge down that hill and get behind them barricades...?'

'...their spies were about, woulda seen ever'one leaving the stockade for Sundee best, barely no one still there...'

There was only silence after that. How could there not even be a dog barking? It was a peculiar silence, not because the conversations had drifted off to nothing as the men plodded by her, but because it was never silent at the diggings. Cacophony was ever present, even after dark. Not tonight.

She shot to her feet, as if doom was at her shoulder. Her heart pounded, and a fierce burn ratcheted through her. How would she defend herself and her ma if what they said was going to come about? Should she rouse her mother and run for it, somewhere down in the township? Would anywhere be safe?

A full moon gleamed, rising but still low in the sky. In its light, she stared across to where she knew the barricades sat at Eureka Lead. No lights, no glow. Would she see anything from here? Would anything even happen?

She paced a little by the faintly glowing coals of her campfire. Worried again, she kicked more dirt over it, then strained to hear any unusual sounds. Nothing. Unless hearing the silence was something. A dog barked once, another answered. A child cried. Her mother snored ... But nothing else.

'Flora.'

She jumped around, her hand at her throat. Blocking the moon, a man stood there. 'Lewis, for God's sakes,' she breathed, recognizing him. 'Frightened six months growth out of me. What are ye doin' here?'

'You should be in your tent this time of night,' he said, his voice low and hoarse. He swiped a hand through his hair and moonlight shone on it.

'You shouldn't be *around* my tent this time of night.'

'It's a danger to be out, for me, for you, for anyone,' he snapped. 'We know there's more foot soldiers been brought in. I came to warn you—to make sure you were inside, no lights, no fires.' He checked over his shoulder then peered back over hers. 'They need little excuse.'

'Who? The troopers?'

'And soldiers. We know they're new, and boys mostly, and they're tired, worked over by too many drills. Tempers high, tolerance low—'

'How do ye know?'

He took her arm, guided her to the log by her smothered camp fire. He settled beside her, not touching, but close enough to talk. Curiously, she couldn't hear Josie's snores any longer. Brushing that off, she concentrated on the worry in his murmured words.

'Whispers. Boasts of those diggers who've taunted them along the road up from Geelong. Others have seen soldiers and more troopers coming in from diggings over yonder Castlemaine.'

'Why ye tellin' me all this? What's it mean? I've had customers here today—'

'The soldiers, the troopers, Flora. They're waiting for us,' his voice grated, close to her ear. 'It would only take one slip and it all blows up.'

'But our diggers are not about to attack.'

'Course not. But if they come for us, we will defend ourselves.' In the low light, she saw him lean forward towards the still warm coals, his arms folded across his legs. 'There's no Chinamen there, but every nation on the diggings otherwise—even an Englishman or two—is represented behind that barricade standing against the licence hunts, the licence fee. Against Hotham.' Hotham was the governor of Victoria, and not someone who seemed to do much to fix grievances on the goldfields. 'But there's none too many of us, and those who are there, none too sober. And the government Camp knows it. We know their spies have been about.'

A shiver fled over her despite the night's warm air. 'Surely not tonight, though?' she asked, her voice a harsh whisper. 'Has it gone midnight yet? It'll be Sunday. No God-fearing folk will let anything happen on a Sunday.' She remembered her remark to Geordie earlier in the day.

He reached for her hand, a light touch. 'Flora, why can't we—'

She snatched it back. 'No, Lewis. Nell was here today, another black eye, another beatin'. I canna be with you, knowin' your uncle is the devil himself, wreaking his evil unchecked.'

Lewis withdrew his hand. Sighed. Rubbed his hands on his knees a long time. Seemed to be thinking hard, struggling. He looked into the night sky, and she could clearly see his stern features in the light.

She cast a glance around her. The tents further down the hill were still, not a breath of air moved anything. No one else was out and about. She looked towards the township and nothing seemed to be moving there, either. All good folk would be a-bed. A couple of lights twinkled, but so far off in the distance she didn't know what they would be.

'Surely nothing will happen,' she whispered. 'It seems so peaceful now. And even though the place is a simmering pot, good sense will prevail—'

He stood up. 'I'll be getting back. It's slow going, hiding all the way under this moonlight, but if I'm caught, I'm done for. There's already a curfew.'

Startled at that, breath stopped in her throat. 'Don't go, then. Stay around here, lay low.'

'Won't be taken kindly if a digger is found hiding around the campfire of a woman.' He stared at her. 'Flora, I would—' Then clearly changed his mind about what he was going to say. Instead, 'Good night, Flora.' As he stepped past her tents, he whispered, 'Goodnight, Mrs Doyle.'

After he'd taken a few paces and his form disappeared, Flora heard her mother's gentle snores resonate once again. She smiled to herself. 'I love ye, too, Ma,' she murmured.

Checking her campsite one last time, she was satisfied that there was no flame from the fire, and no brightly burning coals under her laundry tubs. They'd be a bugger to fire up again tomorrow if they burned down to nothing, but now she was too worried to keep a log alive on them in case it attracted nasty business.

The visit from Lewis had rattled her. Her pulse skipped around, her heart pounded extra hard. Creeping low into the tent she shared with Josie, pulling the flaps closed behind her, she lay down on her cot, boots and all. Didn't bother changing into her nightshift. She knew sleep wouldn't come.

She needed to be wary. Lewis's visit, along with the talk all night from men passing by her tent, and earlier, the men at her laundry, had made her feel as if she was on full alert, like those men at the barricades must feel. The sober ones, that is.

Her thoughts turned to Nell. Her beaten up face. Of how hard she'd worked, despite being sore, side by side with Flora to get the work done. Flora thought of the bastard Nell had married. Her lip curled, and her gut lurched. Would Nell be enduring some madness now? She squeezed her eyes shut, couldn't think of that. Her heart pounded harder.

Josie, her mother. She had to look after her mother, for without her, Flora had nothing. She worried and worried about that as her temples throbbed. And then, the gentle snoring beside her, rhythmic and sing-song at times, low and comfortable, not afraid, lulled her down from her nervous state. She could close her eyes now, for only a few moments, just to rest a while...

A boom of a musket, and a thunderous volley of booms followed, rolling, *cracking* through the still night. Bolting upright, Flora wrenched from her from her sleep. Her blood pounded, shock waves hammered in her chest.

More and more booms—and still more. Deafening for those who would have been nearby— How long would it go on for?

She shot off her bed, grabbed a startled Josie and rolled her to the floor of the tent. *No cover*. No cover if they came marching down the hill firing at will. What shield was canvas against musket balls?

Cowering over her mother, whose strong arms gripped her in return, she waited for what seemed like a never-ending exchange of what could be deadly fire.

Then the muskets stopped and there was nothing until screaming followed, faint as it slinked down the hill, reaching her ears. That noise, keening its way into her head, was more terrible a thing than she had ever known, more ominous than the booming gunshots. It lanced deep into her racing heart.

She sat back on her haunches, helped her mother sit up, and hugged her close. Dear God, was that the regimented stomping of feet she could hear? Her neck was tight, her shoulders tense, and her brows, deeply furrowed, began to pain her. She strained to hear. Was that the shouting of soldiers? Were they already stabbing with their bayonets? But nothing sounded coming down the hill. The only noises were the bewildered cries of others in tents nearby, woken by the muskets.

A drift of smoke crept into her tent through the worn seams and the loose folds of the door flaps. It wafted around, teasing her nostrils.

Then real terror seized her. It wasn't wood smoke. It was the odour of canvas in flames, and with it, the light breeze carried the smell of burning bodies.