Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Silver Thread

Written by Kylie Fitzpatrick

Published by Head of Zeus

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

THE SILVER THREAD

KYLIE FITZPATRICK



LONDON

First published in the UK in 2012 by Head of Zeus, Ltd.

Copyright © Kylie Fitzpatrick, 2012

The moral right of Kylie Fitzpatrick to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781908800121
ISBN (TPB): 9781908800138
ISBN (E): 9781908800862

Printed in Germany.

Head of Zeus, Ltd
Clerkenwell House
45–47, Clerkenwell Green
London EC1R 0HT

www.headofzeus.com

For my parents, Philippa and Bryon, with love.

The Way of Heaven is to benefit others and not to injure.

Lao-Tzu (sixth century BC)

4 April 1841

The grey walls of Millbank receded until they were a dark huddle on the edge of the world. The sun spread across the water, refracting into shards where their oars dipped.

A light that would leave scars.

The Thames snaked towards the sea, carrying the procession of rowing boats, in each a huddle of silent women. The last boat was piled with luggage of modest proportions; canvas sacks, wicker baskets and battered hat boxes. And a single trunk.

The small liberties of freedom – a walk to the market or an idle afternoon in the sun – were hopes once. Now a length of ribbon would seem like freedom. Still, what could be worse than Millbank prison?

For those who had left their children, there was only the grief. Against this, the guilt of any crime was incidental.

At the mouth of the river the currents collided, creating ridges of tidal water frilled with dirty foam. The Thames was opening to the sea. The white water churned like a bilious stomach. Behind the boats, the rising sun traced a copper edge along rooftops and chimneys; a burnished London; a trick of the light.

There was time for one last glance at the receding city; a moment to take in its outline and shape. Once the entire world, London now looked no larger than a page in a picture book, and so pretty that it might be the Otherworld.

All of a sudden the light changed, revealing the new factories along the banks, their chimney stacks exhaling wraiths of smoke, their pipes leaking into the inky river.

Ahead of them lay an unfathomable voyage and a land beyond the seas. This farewell to London might be for ever. Now, there was only the sea, and the shadowy form of a ship appearing through the fog. Drawing closer still, they could read the name painted at the towering prow of their new prison.

Rajah.

I

Linen

I am told that in your country, opium smoking is forbidden under severe penalties. This means that you are aware of how harmful it is. So long as you do not take it yourselves, but continue to make it and tempt the people of China to buy it, such conduct is repugnant to human feeling and at variance with the Way of Heaven.

'Your country lies 20,000 leagues away; but for all that, The Way of Heaven holds good for you as it does for us, and your instincts are no different from ours; for nowhere are men so blind as not to distinguish what brings profit and what does harm.

From a letter to Queen Victoria from
Imperial High Commissioner Lin Zexu, 1839

Flax

I arise today
Through the strength of heaven;
Light of sun,
Radiance of moon,
Splendour of fire,
Speed of lightning,
Swiftness of wind,
Depth of sea,
Stability of earth,
Firmness of rock.

St Patrick (fifth century bc)

Do not think of him.

Rhia had been not thinking about William all afternoon and it showed. She squinted: the pattern was crooked.

Everything was out of shape lately. *Serpentine*, Mamo would have said. *Life does not always beat an even rhythm, Rhiannon. It meanders like chords on a harp.* The resonance of the old woman's voice seemed to move the air. She could almost be in the room. Rhia let her paintbrush drop into the tray. She had tried to resurrect the pattern all afternoon and it still looked as wrinkled as silk moiré. Now the light was only fit for catching swirls of dust, the sun so low that it filtered through the canvas, making her pigments as translucent as coloured glass.

She blamed William. He should not have called.

It could have been a day given, with the front room all to herself and nothing to do but paint. It could have been. The question was, would her father understand that she'd had to tell William what had happened in Greystones all those years ago? It was unlikely.

To Connor Mahoney, truth was a holy thing. So was chastity. And marriage. This was the kind of rhetoric he had brandished since Rhia was old enough to irk him. She had always been expert at it. She understood, now, that it depended on the nature of the truth, and that discretion outranked honesty. Sadly, she possessed neither.

A carriage bell tinkled and, not for the first time that day, Rhia wished herself in Greystones, walking barefoot on the shale, listening only to the sea and the gulls.

Connor Mahoney's boots tapped briskly up the stairs.

Rhia removed her smock. She paced to the front window. She smoothed her hair in its reflection and paced back to the fireplace. There was absolutely no need to tell him that she had upset his cherished William. It would all blow over and they would be married next February as scheduled. The time for having a say in such matters was past – the fact remained that no one else had offered. The fact remained that she had not fallen in love.

Or else, she had not fallen for love.

Rhia shivered and cast about for her shawl. The air had moved again.

Mamo despised cynicism.

Connor Mahoney's voice murmured in the hallway, talking to Hannah. Rhia retrieved her shawl from the floor and turned to the fire, her back to the door. She softened her gaze, looking for shapes in the flames, dancing like dervishes. She willed them to lend her their grace. Rhia could sense her father's

mood through the wall. He was unusually irritable lately. This was most definitely not the time to tell him that she had insulted her fiancé.

The door opened.

'Rhia.'

Strange how you could tell someone was angry with you just by the way they spoke your name. She could think of nothing she had done to rile him lately.

'Father.'

His jaw was squared for a fight. His anger made him look old and ugly, though his frame was trim and his thick hair still as bright as copper. He snapped a folded piece of paper at her. 'I've had a letter from William.'

Rhia had not expected this. 'From William?' Her voice sounded high and unnatural. The letter must have been written as soon as he had left her.

'He has withdrawn his offer,' said her father.

'Withdrawn his—!I am to be …' Rhia strode to the door and back, smashing a pipe dish to the floor with her skirts. She took a breath. 'I am not a *property*,' she spat. The flames had lent her nothing. She clenched her fists, took another breath and suddenly felt like laughing. She lowered her eyes and stared hard at the pattern on the Persian rug. It only reminded her of her failed painting. Persians could design patterns fit for the feet of a goddess.

'Until you are married, you are *as my property*, and I will not have you become a burden on this household.' He was almost choking on the words but they hit their mark. He had never called her a burden before. He would regret it, she thought, though with almighty self-restraint she held her tongue. She would say the wrong thing and he would see that she was unrepentant – relieved rather than ashamed.

He paced between the cutting table and the wall of shelves where the cloth was stored, his hair falling across his spectacles, his cheeks hot with emotion. He was not finished. 'You should have been married years ago, and now I wonder if anyone will have you.'

Rhia had wondered the same thing herself.

He stood with his back to her, talking to the bolts of fabric. 'William O'Donahue is a respectable and successful merchant. He would have been a great asset to this family – to the business.'

Rhia flinched. Restraint be damned. 'Is that what this is about? The *business*? William is a dullard who does not dare to wed a woman who is cleverer than he. I'm *glad* I need not see his face each day!'

Her father spun and glared at her, his eyes burning. 'I did not raise you to have opinions! If it were not for your … were it not for your mother's family, then you would be like any agreeable Dublin girl. Instead, you read the papers and tour the city like a milkmaid. I see now that you have deliberately offended William in order that he be forced to cancel the engagement. What in tarnation did you say to him?'

'I did no such thing! I would not.' Rhia lowered her voice. 'I told him what happened the winter Michael Kelly was arrested.'

Connor Mahoney was silent. When he finally spoke, his voice was hoarse. 'You told him that you helped those tenants; that you made a Protestant landlord look like a blackguard?'

Rhia held his gaze. She had only done what anyone with an ounce of compassion would have. The weavers were being evicted because their rent was not paid. It was the middle of winter. They might have starved. They would certainly have frozen. She had taken them to Mamo's cottage. Not long after, Michael Kelly's boys torched a shipment belonging to the same

landlord, a tea merchant. He, the landlord, came after Michael, who broke his nose. Michael was transported.

Her father was glaring at her. She had not answered him. 'Yes, I told him,' she said quietly.

'Foolish girl. O'Donahue is a business associate of the man Michael Kelly assaulted.'

'All the more reason not to marry him.'

'You are a devil in petticoats!' He slammed the flat of his hand on the table.

'And you are a damned tyrant! I should have married Thomas Kelly, at least he loves me.'

He had once.

'You will not breed with a weaver!' He strode to the door and stopped with his hand on the knob. Without looking at her he said, 'We shall discuss this further when your mother returns. I will dine at my club.'

He left the room.

She stood shaking with anger, her fingernails digging into her palms. 'I am not a child!' Rhia called after him, but the second she heard the front door close she collapsed onto the Chesterfield, feeling every bit a child. He was right, she should be married by now. William O'Donahue was from Belfast; he had not encountered her reputation before they met, and now she had turned him against her.

Hannah knocked before she entered. She had no doubt heard everything, even if she hadn't had her ear to the door. She scurried about more than was necessary, poking at the fire and lighting the lamps. 'Will you have supper in here, miss?

'I'm a devil in petticoats, Hannah.'

The maid chuckled. 'Well I never heard that one before. He's only in a mood.'

'He's been in a mood for months. This time last year we

would never have closed the front room for an entire day. And now I've turned away the only man in Dublin who might have married me.'

'I'll tell Tilly to make dumplings,' Hannah said, and hurried away as though nothing could be more pressing.

Rhia crossed the room and picked up her paintbrush. The motif was a spray of orange and yellow calendula. If she could make it right, everything else might straighten out too. When her father got home they would make amends. They never slept on a quarrel.

At the sound of Hannah's voice, Rhia's eyes flickered open. She was on the Chesterfield and Hannah was leaning over her, reeking of tooth powder and glycerine. 'There's a fire!' she puffed breathlessly. The candlestick in her plump hand tipped dangerously. Its flame cast skittish shadows around the walls and was the only fire in sight, as far as Rhia could see.

She swung her feet to the floor in a tangle of skirts, catching Hannah below the knees. The maid clutched the arm of the Chesterfield to steady herself; Rhia stumbled around in the dark. There was something she had to remember. What? Shouldn't there be smoke? She found the door to the hallway.

'Quick, Hannah, wake the others, we must get everyone out of the house!'

'It's not in the house,' puffed Hannah, following her. 'It's at Merchant's Quay. The night-soil men saw it.'

The storehouse.

Rhia ran up the dark hallway towards the stairs, though she couldn't think why. Boots? She collided with the banister in the dark, hitting her head and cursing. She could do without boots.

Hannah was behind her when she turned, her nightgown as voluminous as sailcloth. 'I've got Tom hitching up, and his

brother's taken the steed to fetch your mam. Don't forget your cloak! And where's your blessed boots? Merciful heavens, and Mr Mahoney's not home yet …'

Rhia stopped. This was what she needed to remember. 'What is the time, Hannah?'

Hannah didn't know. She had found the boots and followed Rhia back down the hallway chattering anxiously. She mustn't worry – her da would still be at his club, he wasn't exactly going to be at the quay after the soil collection, was he? And would she please put on these blessed boots? It was the first of November, after all.

Rhia stood at the front door, fumbling with the clasp of her old red cloak. There was no time to button boots. Of course he would still be at the club. He would be playing another game of cribbage, or talking about the new looms; or he'd decided to have another brandy or two because his daughter wasn't to be married to a tea merchant after all.

Outside, Tom the groom had hitched the two-seater and the horses were shifting and snorting restlessly, their breath trailing mist in the air. Tom was bleary-eyed, his pale hair in a tangle beneath his cap. He reeked of poteen. He nodded when Rhia climbed up beside him and slapped the reins before she was seated. The horses lurched forwards and she clutched the hammercloth to stop from toppling backwards. She searched her mind for a prayer.

The chaise almost tipped as they clattered through St Auden's Gate and past St Patrick's. Rhia glanced at the cathedral. Would the saint give a damn about an irresolute Catholic?

Save our storehouse and I'll stop the cursing.

Was it enough?

And I'll attend church.

They'd reached an unsafe speed. Rhia looked sideways at

Tom, tilted forwards, enjoying himself: the groom was a lunatic at the reins even when he'd not been at the drink. She should take them from him, but she wasn't sure that she'd do any better. The mare was on edge; her ears pricked back.

'Slow down, Tom! She'll bolt if she gets any faster.'

Tom nodded. 'Aye, we'll not stop before Kilkenny if Epona bolts. But I reckon Mr Mahoney's at the storehouse.'

'He's not. He's at his club.'

'He's not. It's gone two.'

Rhia's heart pitched. The club closed at one. 'Well then he's gone to the quay to supervise the firefighters.' This seemed reasonable.

The sky above the waterfront was lit up as if all the saints of Dublin were swinging their blessed lanterns above Merchant's Quay. As they rounded the corner of the last alley, Rhia braced herself to see the entire waterfront ablaze. But only the Mahoney storehouse was burning. This was somehow more devastating.

Rhia leapt clear of the chaise before the wheels stopped. Connor Mahoney would be close to the front of the crowd, perhaps with the *gardaí*. She pushed her way through the press of spectators, their faces glowing eerily in the blaze. A wall of flames rose from the stone foundations where only yesterday had stood a wall of brick. The air was poisonous with fumes, the heat staggering. The quay was lit like a carnival, with people still arriving to watch along the opposite shore.

She could not see him.

She darted between fists of spectators, trying to see beyond the line of *gardaí* keeping the crowd back. She searched the faces of the men by the waterside. He must be on the other side, closer to the storehouse, but she would have to get around the *gardaí*. She moved along the edges of the crowd, as close to the

furnace as she could get without being overcome by the heat. She might have got a little closer but someone grabbed her wrist, twisting it like a rope. The rough, unwashed wool of a *garda*'s tunic was suddenly in her face.

'*Tuilli!*' She spat before she could remember her wager with the saint. Perhaps cursing in Irish didn't count?

'Who are you calling bastard, you wee tinker?' The *garda*'s expression was as dirty as his face. Rhia held his gaze and tried yanking her arm away, but his fingers pressed into the flesh of her wrist.

'Loose your hand or I'll bite it!' she snapped.

His hand was like a slipknot, fastening tighter when she twisted. He was strong. A ghost of a smile twitched at his lips. 'You don't want to be getting too close to a burning building, now. It could all come down faster than your legs can carry you away.'

'*Please!* It's my family's storehouse. I'm looking for my father!'

'You're never the Mahoney lass?' The raised eyebrows and swift appraising glance said it all. Her hair would be like a bird's nest – it always was after sleep – and her favourite cloak was old. Her feet, she suddenly realised, were bare. The dark looks of the Black Irish came from her mother's side, and Black Irish were as good as tinkers to many Catholics. People thought them of dark nature, as well, which was occasionally useful.

'There's a bold-hearted *garda* gone in after your da. An hour ago.'

An hour. The words crushed the breath from Rhia's chest like a lead corset. The *garda*'s grip held her upright.

'You mean …' She would not say it.

He nodded grimly. He expected the worst.

She should pray. Mamo would not counsel prayers to saints.

St Patrick had chased the true religion from Ireland and stolen the sovereignty of women. That's what Mamo said. She would say that fire, being elemental, was the business of the creatures of the Otherworld. Connor Mahoney said Mamo was without religion. To Rhia the stories were just as credible as the immaculate conception and an immortal carpenter. She stared into the fire for the second time that evening, though this time looking for a different kind of grace. For a heartbeat the flames sculpted a heat-white sylph, twisted like a crone. Had she called it from the crucible?

Cailleach. Death.

It was only a fire trick; air warped by heat. Rhia had outgrown dragons and enchantresses and vaporous creatures, and all but the most persistent ghosts. She closed her eyes; opened them. Just flames.

She looked around for a means of escape. There was none, so she bit the *garda*'s hand. He tasted as bad as he looked. He bellowed and drew back his other hand, but seemed to think better of hitting her. She might be Connor Mahoney's daughter after all. He twisted her wrist a little tighter instead, making her wince.

'Why has your mam not come?' The *garda* was watching her closely. Did he really think her a tinker, and if he did, then why not let her go? She just might be Connor Mahoney's daughter.

'She's not in town.' The rents were due and more weavers were in trouble. Brigit Mahoney's swift, charitable hands at the loom might not save them, but, in spite of her husband's disapproval, she wouldn't stand by and watch another eviction. The mechanised loom might be the pride of Belfast, but it was enemy to the Greystones pieceworkers.

Rhia suddenly remembered Tom. He could explain who she

was to her captor. She scanned the crowd hopefully, but her heart sank when she saw him. Tom had joined a nearby group of spectators who were passing around a flask. The fire had drawn a sizeable crowd from the rookeries as well as from the opposite shore. It was an amusement.

'Cheaper than the penny gaff,' said the *garda*, following her gaze.

The stink of charred cloth filled the air. Rhia remembered Mamo telling her that they'd used linen rags as tinder, because it burnt well. The smoke was in her eyes and lungs. She felt hollowed out. Along with the great timbers of the storehouse, she was dragon's prey. It suddenly struck her that the assurance society's men were not here. She elbowed the *garda*, who narrowed his eyes. 'Where are the firefighters?' she demanded.

'They went home.'

'*Why?*'

'Building's not insured.'

'The building *is* insured!'

He shrugged. His look said that biting him again was not advisable.

It was impossible; Connor Mahoney was unerringly conscientious; *fastidious*, even. He would not forget to keep up the assurance payments. Rhia shook her head, disbelieving.

Eventually, the *garda* eased his vice a little so his dirty nails did not bite into her flesh. Again Rhia tried to snatch her arm away; his grip tightened in response. She did not try again. The fire lessened but continued to burn through the night.

She watched and waited as though her father's life depended on her not taking her eyes from the flames. This time she was certain she saw Cailleach. The hag's hair was a mantle of blazing flax, and her fiery gown trailed the ruin like the tail of the

dragon. She was terrible and beautiful; her face as white as ash, her lips as red as embers.

Was she here to take Connor Mahoney?

'Bring him out or …' What? What bargaining power could she possibly have with Death? Threaten to marry a Catholic? She almost had.

The *garda* was looking at her. Had she spoken aloud? The figure vanished into the flames, leaving Rhia blinking away hot tears.

The heat diminished and the flames settled. Darkness lifted just as suddenly, or so it seemed, and the smoking ruin was exposed. The storehouse, yesterday unyielding and constant on the waterfront, was a carcass. Bricks, timbers and thousands of pounds' worth of new linen all reduced to a fine white dust, waiting to be carried away by the smallest breeze.

Brigit Mahoney arrived as dawn exposed the ashen rubble. Most of the crowd had drifted away. Only vagabonds, a few sailors and the *gardaí* remained. Brigit embraced Rhia, but could not speak. Her face, normally so carefully composed, was creased with fear. She was almost in her fiftieth year but her features might have been carved from well-preserved wood. She seemed smaller today, her shoulders rigid.

Brigit was looking at Rhia's feet and Rhia followed her gaze. They looked like marble in the half-light. She had barely noticed the aching chill of them until now.

'I didn't feel the cold,' she mumbled.

'Then perhaps they are frozen. My calfskin slippers are in the carriage. There is a flask of tea.'

Rhia returned from the carriage shod and carrying the stoneware flask. Her mother was talking quietly to the *garda* who had detained her. He glanced up at Rhia wearing an expression that said he believed her, now. They shared the

steaming brew with the remaining men. None spoke Connor Mahoney's name.

They waited. No one wanted to be the first to lose hope, but there was no sign of life from the ruin, and barely a flame. 'The lawn at the cottage is like a Persian carpet,' Brigit whispered. 'The pink and scarlet rose petals are scattered everywhere.' She was trying to evoke something beautiful; to soothe them both. 'And the leaves from the maple and the copper beech. I thought you might come with your paintbox …' She trailed off with a choking sound, her fingers flying to her lips. Rhia followed her gaze. The body of Connor Mahoney was being carried from the skeleton of the storehouse on a makeshift bier by two *gardaí*. He was black as a sweep and as still as death.

Her mother gripped her hand so hard it felt as if the bones would crack. They walked towards the bier, which was being lowered gently to the ground. Those gathered stepped back to let them pass. Connor Mahoney's left leg was twisted so badly that it looked as though his trousers were stuffed with rags. His face was a dark mask.

The moment was an eternity.

Brigit sank down beside her husband and kissed his blackened lips as though they were alone together. '*Leannán*,' she whispered, *my love*. Her little shoulders finally collapsed. Rhia knelt beside her.

'He is alive,' said the young *garda*, black from head to foot. 'He is alive.'

Rhia laughed and her mother wept. The *garda* beamed and thumped the young hero on the back, handing him the flask. The boy told them how they had passed the night. The fire started at the bottom of the building, he said, when Mr Mahoney fell down the stairs, dropping a tallow into a basket of oiled linen. In the fall he'd broken his leg, and by the time

his rescuer arrived the cellar was their only hope. It was, providentially, connected to a tunnel that led deep into an old vault close by the river. A tiny vent; perhaps a rat's entrance, had allowed them to breathe plain air when the room filled with smoke.

The boy waved off their thanks and praise and looked uncomfortable. He did not seem to think it remarkable that he had saved a man's life. He was merely disappointed that the flask contained tea and not whiskey.

Someone was despatched for the infirmary coach.

Rhia watched her mother take the coarse blanket that was offered and place it gently over her husband. She brushed his hair from his eyes, lightly, and dusted ash from his shoulders.

The *garda* who had detained Rhia smiled before he walked away. She smiled back. Cailleach be damned. Tonight, after all, there had been grace.