

Introducing

DEEP WATER

Book Two of The Castings Trilogy
by Pamela Freeman

THE WELL OF SECRETS

‘The desire to know the future gnaws at our bones,’ said Safred, the Well of Secrets. ‘Or so a stonecaster told me.’

Her uncle Cael grunted and kept cutting up the carrots. Carrots, beets, onion and garlic, lemon juice, and oil. Delicious.

‘Are you going to bake that?’ Safred said hopefully. She wasn’t fond of salad, but Cael loved it.

Cael grinned at her. ‘The desire to know the future gnaws at our bones.’

She laughed, then sighed.

‘They’re coming. Send out the word. The girl is badly hurt.’ She paused. ‘They may not get here in time. It will be difficult.’

‘Don’t tire yourself out.’

‘You’d rather I let her die? Besides, you’ll like her, this Bramble. She’s contrary.’

He grimaced at her but went out to the street to spread the word, as she had instructed. The Well of Secrets sat for a few moments more, wondering if she had the strength to bring the Kill Reborn back from her second death. The gods were silent on the matter, although she had asked them, a thing she rarely did. Prophecy was all very well, but sometimes things came to a tipping point, where the future could go either way, or they came to a person who held the future in

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her hand, and this was such a time and Bramble such a person. If the Kill Reborn lived . . . if the girl Bramble survived . . . which was more important? Safred thought that not even the gods knew. What would happen in the next day would shape the future of the Domains, perhaps of the world, and Safred was as blind to it as Cael was.

‘Gnaws like a rat,’ she said, and laughed so that she would not cry.

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‘Ash! Catch her!’ Martine shouted.

Ash moved by instinct, kicking his horse towards Bramble’s as she swayed and slid sideways, her eyelids fluttering. He grabbed her awkwardly, her shoulder hitting his and almost pushing him out of his saddle. He gripped with his knees, but that was a mistake, because the horse – what was its name? Cam? – took that as a signal to go faster. They started to pull away from Bramble’s horse, with Bramble still half out of the saddle and Ash’s reins caught up underneath her back. She was not quite a dead weight, and she struggled weakly, as though she thought Ash was trying to pull her off the horse. Her skin was as hot as though he were holding a cup of fresh cha.

Bramble’s horse blew out through her nose in disgust and stopped dead, and Ash’s horse stopped with her. They were still badly aligned, but now he could hoist Bramble back onto her seat. He brushed her wounded

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arm as he steadied her, and she made a sound halfway between a moan and a scream, and fainted truly.

He managed to push her so that she fell forwards, over her horse's neck. The arm that the wolves had savaged dropped and hung straight, and Ash could see for the first time just how swollen it was. The sleeve of her shirt, even pulled back as it was, cut deep into the puffy red flesh.

The wound, made by a wolf's claw, was starting to smell, the unmistakable sweet smell of decay.

Martine smelt it too. 'The Well of Secrets is her only hope of keeping that arm,' she said. 'We'll have to ride faster.'

They used a shift of Martine's to lash Bramble to the neck of her horse. Ash was nervous as he did it, because Trine had already tried to take a few bites out of him, but this time she waited patiently, occasionally turning her head to nose at Bramble's good shoulder.

Then they rode.

They had sighted Oakmere, where the Well of Secrets lived, from the top of the Golden Valley mountain pass just before sunset, and the town had seemed only an hour or so riding away. Ash had thought they would have plenty of time to reach it before the northern twilight ended. But as they went down into the valley, and then up the hill and down into the next valley, and the next, they realised that they had been deceived. They had stopped to rest the horses at a stream that flowed icy cold down from the mountains, but they didn't dare take Bramble off Trine in case they couldn't put her on again. They managed to get her

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to drink a little water, and Martine made a cold compress for the arm, but it was clearly useless.

‘I don’t know how fast we can go without risking the horses,’ Ash said with frustration.

‘The horses can be sacrificed if necessary,’ Martine replied.

Ash’s mouth twisted wryly. ‘As long as you tell her it was *your* decision!’ he said. He had met Bramble only that morning, but he knew already that her horses were like gold to her – no, not gold, but something more precious. He didn’t want to be the one to tell her one of them was dead.

Martine returned the half smile. ‘That’s fair. Let’s go.’

Even tied on, Bramble swayed in the saddle. By sunset, she was delirious, muttering about guilt and death and someone called Leof who had let her go from somewhere, against orders. ‘Shagging pine trees!’ she said suddenly, clearly, then moaned. Ash felt embarrassed and guilty, as he had when Doronit had made him listen to the secrets of the dead, back in Turvite. He tried not to listen, but his horse worked best with Trine, so he rode next to Bramble, supporting her, and he felt every word as well as hearing it.

Martine took their reins and led them both, to leave Ash’s hands free. He trusted her to find the road and set the pace. All his attention spiralled down to Bramble. He was determined to save her. He had killed a warlord’s man to protect her, back in the Golden Valley, and he didn’t want that death to be for nothing. If Bramble lived, he would feel better about killing the man Sully. If she died – he didn’t want to think about the waste of two lives, so he rode and rode and supported Bramble and prayed to the local gods.

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The ride turned into a rhythm of canter and rest and canter. He was blind to the spring beauty of the mountains; deaf to the wind and the birds and the constant, rushing sound of the streams. All he knew was Bramble's back under his hands, his own back screaming in protest at the unnatural pose, his breath and the horses' drowning out hers. She was breathing in feeble gasps, as though each breath hurt.

Every hill forced her back in the saddle until she was supported only by the cloth under her armpits and by Ash's hands. Every downslope sent her sliding towards Trine's head, rubbing the inflamed arm and shoulder and making her cry out. She roused sometimes and blinked vaguely at Ash. He got her to drink whenever he could, but finally she didn't even react when her arm hit the saddlebow.

Ash raised his head and stared at Martine in despair. 'She's dying,' he said.

He became aware that it was growing dark. They had ridden through the long hours of twilight and into the night. The horses were labouring up another slope, a zigzag path that led to a high ridge. They were exhausted. Ash became abruptly conscious of the pain in his legs and back. His own tiredness almost overwhelmed him.

'It can't be far now,' Martine said, but her tone was doubtful. She looked pale and her face showed more lines than usual. She eased her backside in the saddle and winced. 'Let's hope she can cure saddle-sores as well,' she said.

It was a good try at a joke, but Ash was too tired to laugh. They plodded up the rise, sure that there

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would be nothing but another empty valley in front of them.

There were lights. In the valley, there were lights beginning to shine. One by one they sparked up below them, flaring gold and white and yellow until the valley seemed carpeted with stars.

Ash tried to say something, but his mind refused to work.

Bramble breathed more harshly.

‘That’s the beginning of the death breathing. It will get louder, and then the rattle will start,’ Martine said, her voice tight. ‘Go! Go! There’s still a chance!’

They set the horses at the downslope as fast as they dared. Then, Ash gritted his teeth, took the reins back from Martine, and urged Cam and Trine even faster. If the horses broke a leg, so be it. Bramble’s breathing was coming slower and louder. He put his head down and pushed the tired horses to their fastest pace. They couldn’t do it for long, but he spoke to them, as he had heard Bramble doing back in Golden Valley.

‘Come on, come on, you’re her only hope! Come on!’ he shouted.

Astonishingly, they responded, letting the momentum of the slope carry them, getting their legs under them by sheer luck and will, almost falling down the hillside. They left Martine behind.

Then the lights were around him, and people – people leading them to a house and saying things like, ‘The Well of Secrets wants you to take the sick lass straight to her!’ and ‘Don’t worry now, she’ll fix her!’ and ‘Someone get Mullet!’

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It was disorienting, loud, deeply reassuring. All his senses had come abruptly alive, so that everything registered sharply: the golden lights and the night chill, the shining eyes of the people milling in a group behind the horses. His own tiredness washed away in a surge of relief and warmth.

Then there was a house, with wide double doors lit by oil lamps, and an old man waiting for them, so old his back was bent half over and his eyes were milky with rheum. He helped Ash dismount painfully, who then set to loosen the cloth under Bramble's armpits.

'I'm Mullet. She sent me to take care of the horses,' the old man said, and reached for Cam's leading rein with the assurance of an ostler. Cam neighed in alarm and threw up her head. Ash couldn't believe it, but Bramble roused at that and looked at Mullet closely. He met her eyes and grinned, showing one tooth top and bottom on different sides of his mouth. 'She'll be right with me, lass,' he said. Bramble nodded and fell off the horse.

Before Ash could move to help, another man was there to catch her and cradle her. Ash assessed him. Tall, very strong, about fifty, with olive colouring and bright blue eyes, a neat beard that left his cheeks bare. Not a Traveller. He had come out silently, leaving the door wide behind him, and now he simply turned and walked back inside with Bramble.

Martine arrived, scrambled off her horse and gave the reins to the grinning old man, who grinned even wider as he saw her limping. The man carrying Bramble didn't look back. Ash was annoyed that he and Martine

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were being ignored, but he reserved judgement. Saving Bramble's life was the important thing.

He stayed behind Martine as they went into the house. As they passed the threshold he shuddered, feeling suddenly edgy and dangerous with it.

'Remember, no killing the Well of Secrets,' Martine said in a whisper, reading his mood as she so often did. 'If she's really irritating, you can do it later.'

He grinned involuntarily and relaxed a little as they went through the doorway into a room that took up the whole ground floor. The kitchen hearth was at the back, fire blazing, with a table and chairs before it, and a door near the hearth led to a yard he could see through a window. There were lamps alight everywhere, making the room as bright as day. At the front was a big open space with another table covered with a mattress and coverlet. An ordinary mattress, not a featherbed, and a coverlet of homespun wool dyed dark orange. He had had a coverlet of the same colour in his room at Doronit's, when she first started training him to be a safeguarder. He was looking at the bed and thinking about coverlets because something in him did not want to look at the woman who stood on the other side of the table. To speak to her, to deal with her, would change life forever.

Every ounce of Sight in him had reared up and screamed the moment he had walked into the room. It was the first time he admitted how strong his Sight had become. If it were Sight. He didn't know if life would be changed for the better or worse. Just that it would be changed profoundly, irreversibly. The Well of Secrets caught the thought, Ash realised. He had *Seen* her catch it, seen the oddly bright green eyes smile

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a little, the head tilt up just a fraction, the short sandy eyelashes flicker.

‘Nothing lasts forever, not even change,’ the Well of Secrets said directly to him, then she turned to the table where the man had already laid Bramble. She took a small knife from her belt and cut Bramble’s shirt off, revealing the arm, so swollen and red that it looked like it didn’t belong to her pale body. The original wound from the wolf claw had almost disappeared into the swelling. Bramble roused a little and whispered, ‘If I die, tell my sister. Maryrose. Carlion.’

The Well of Secrets nodded matter-of-factly, and Bramble fainted.

She was deeply unconscious, alarmingly pale, and still beautiful, her upper body covered only by breastbands. Martine glanced at Ash, clearly wondering how susceptible he would be to this display of female flesh. That annoyed him. He was keeping watch on both doors and on the big man who had carried Bramble in. He glanced at the Well of Secrets, but turned away immediately. He couldn’t spare any attention for Bramble. In a strange place, even one that had welcomed them, his safeguarder training took over. He had to mind their backs. He would think about Bramble being beautiful later – if she lived.

The Well of Secrets took hold of Bramble’s arm and began to sing softly, in the harsh, grating voice of the dead, but modulated by a living body. *His* voice. Ash whipped around and took a step forward, but the big man put out an arm to bar his way. Ash didn’t notice. All his attention was on the Well of Secrets, his guts churning with disbelief and a wild hope that, somehow, he was about to find the answer to his own

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strange voice. She sang a chant from the burial caves, a lament from beyond the grave, horrible, spine-chilling, nauseating. As she sang, the flesh on Bramble's arm cooled, paled. The red streaks, which had stretched threatening claws up to her shoulder, now shrank back and disappeared.

A part of him almost, *almost*, understood what she was chanting. Stray fragments whipped past him before he could fully grasp their meaning. Something about coolness, and wholeness . . . but he couldn't really understand. What he could feel was the ebb and flow of power. He closed his eyes, and it was plainer, like water flowing into a stream and being turned back by a strong current. The water flow increased, but it made no headway. The current was too strong. Ash could feel the sweat break out on his back and forehead. So much power being poured out. So much that the vessel itself might be emptied, and they would be left with two corpses. Because it wasn't working.

Bramble's breathing stopped.

The Well of Secrets turned sheet-white and staggered. She grabbed onto the edge of the table to stop herself falling. The man sprang forward to support her. While she stood, breathing fast and weak, the red marks began to creep up Bramble's arm again, but the girl lay still as stone.

The healer released herself from the man. She faced the table with determination and placed her hands again on Bramble's shoulder.

Ash moved forwards and stood next to her, and put his own hand over hers. He didn't quite know why, but he was sure that he had to do it, sure with

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Sight and with something more familiar to him than Sight, a fighter's instinct, solidarity.

This time the Well of Secrets' song was stronger, like a call to arms. Sweat stood out on her forehead and her hands began to shake, but she kept singing. The song rose in pitch and loudness until it was painful to hear. Ash began to tremble and feel weak, but he didn't know if it were just the noise, or if power was being taken from him.

He closed his eyes and saw that both were true, that it was the song itself that siphoned strength from him. He could feel himself getting weaker, but he knew that it wasn't going to work. That Bramble was dead.

The Well of Secrets stopped singing.

Ash almost fainted as the power drained away, and he thought he might topple backwards, but then he felt someone giving him a push in the back to steady him and he stood upright, firm on his feet. A surge of strength went through him and into the Well of Secrets. She began singing again, louder than before.

Bramble coughed and began to breathe again. Her eyes stayed closed, but she said, 'Oh Maryro-ose!' in the voice of a young girl complaining about having to do something she didn't want to do – clean up her room, perhaps.

The Well of Secrets began to sing again, her voice dropping suddenly to a whisper, a plea. The wound disgorged a great gout of pus and then began to close, weeks of healing before their eyes. But it was greater than healing, because the wound itself disappeared. Then the chant died away and there was no mark on Bramble's arm, not even a scar to show where she had been wounded.

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'She'll sleep the night through and wake hungry,' the Well of Secrets said, her words blurred with exhaustion. She patted Ash's arm in acknowledgment and he almost fell. The big man guided her away, up the stairs. She only came up to his armpit. Not a tall woman, not beautiful, not commanding or elegant or motherly or any of the things that gave women power of various kinds in the world. Ordinary, except for those eyes. But there, thought Ash, lay Bramble whole and unmarked. And he himself was still trembling.

As they reached the bend in the stairs Martine found her voice. 'Thank you,' she said, her face showing that she knew the words were inadequate. The Well of Secrets smiled at her wryly, acknowledging the thought as well as the thanks, and continued up. The man stayed on the landing, watching until they heard a door close upstairs.

'Most people don't find their tongue so fast,' he said. 'She doesn't get many thanks.' It was not clear whether he thought this was a good or bad thing. He came back down the stairs and turned to Ash. 'She's not so good at giving them, either.'

'It wasn't me,' he said. 'Something else helped.'

The man looked at him sceptically and shrugged. 'I'm Cael,' he said. 'You'd be Ash and Martine, yes?'

They nodded. Ash was uncomfortable and wondered instantly what else Cael knew about him. Martine's mouth was set. She didn't like it either. She sniffed, and then motioned to the pool of pus on the coverlet. 'I'll clean that up, if you tell me where to find water.'

He smiled with his eyes. 'Most people don't think of that, either. Expect it to disappear by enchantment.'

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Don't worry. There's someone paid to clean.' He looked at Bramble. 'Do you have another shirt for her?'

'Her pack is on her horse,' Martine answered.

'I'll get it,' Ash said, and he made for the open door, glad of the excuse to get out of the room, but still having trouble controlling his legs. Halfway to the door he had to sit down on a bench.

There was a crowd standing just outside. They had clearly been listening and matching. They looked at him with interest and his cheeks reddened.

'You, Little Vole, go and get the girl's pack from Mullet,' Cael ordered a young blond boy. The boy ran off and Cael closed the doors. Ash let himself sit for a moment to recover. He didn't have to prove anything to anyone.

'They were expecting us to arrive,' Martine remarked.

'She told them to keep the street clear so the horses could get through. She said there was no time to waste.' Cael's voice held a slight disapproval.

'We came as fast as the horses could bear,' Martine said. She shifted uncomfortably, aware abruptly of her own chafing and sore muscles. 'And that was a good deal faster than I found comfortable, I can tell you!'

He laughed, a booming laugh as big as the rest of him, and Martine smiled, but she wasn't as easily distracted as that.

'Are we allowed to know who you are?' she asked.

'I'm uncle to the Well of Secrets.' He used the honorific sarcastically. 'Her real name's Safred. She told me to tell you.'

'Why?'

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He shrugged. 'Fools need the mystery. Those who have mysteries of their own need the truth.'

'Did she say that?'

He regarded her quizzically, head on one side and eyes bright.

'Nay. She's not one for turning phrases. She said other things, though. Like to find you lodgings somewhere cheap but clean, and look after the horses, and make sure the young lad eats well.'

Martine laughed. 'No fear there. He has the appetite of a wolverine.'

The door banged open and the boy, Little Vole, ran in with Bramble's saddlebags. The men left it to Martine to dress Bramble in her clean shirt, and when she was ready, Cael picked her up and led the Travellers to their lodging house, around the corner in the marketplace.

Oakmere was not what Ash had expected. Although there were more inns and lodging houses than you would normally find in a town of middling size, there were no shanties on the edges, no crowds of beggars targeting new arrivals, no one selling souvenirs on the street, no one offering to guide them or cure them or sell them an underage daughter, guaranteed a virgin.

Ash walked behind, still guarding their backs. Oakmere had a thriving market, judging by the number of shuttered stalls and tents. As in Turvite, in Sator Square, the marketplace was alive at night, with eating houses and a few stalls still open.

Two Travellers and a third being carried attracted some attention, but not the black looks he had been braced for, the type Travellers normally endured in small towns. Here, there was curiosity but no hatred.

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A couple of stallholders and diners even smiled at him. It unsettled him more than open hostility would have. He wasn't used to a world where Travellers were welcomed.

There was a large inn on the southern side of the marketplace, but Cael turned into a much smaller lodging house near it.

Despite Safred's advice Ash wasn't interested in finding dinner. They had settled into their room and Bramble was sleeping deeply on a bed in the corner.

'You heard. She sang with – with the voice of the dead.' He sat on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, his hands hanging.

Martine looked at him with affection and some concern. 'Well, she's a real healer, a prophet, a conduit for the gods.'

'But the voice of the dead! That's *my* voice, the voice I sing in! Could – could I be a healer, too? She took my strength, she used it.'

'I think you would know by now if you had that gift,' she said gently. 'Apart from anything else, I think Doronit would have found it out.'

Ash flinched slightly at Doronit's name. She had trained him as a safeguarder, and he had planned to make his living that way since those were the only skills he had mastered, but now he had to ask, what was he? A healer? An enchanter? Or just someone with a bit of Sight that the Well of Secrets could use?

Martine reminded him, 'The Well of Secrets said you had to eat.'

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‘But why?’ His voice rose like a young boy’s and he flushed. Any message from that source sounded portentous, threatening who knew what.

‘I think just because she foresaw that you would be . . . overset a little, and wanted you to settle down.’

‘Does that mean she saw what I’d do?’

Martine shook her head. ‘No. I’m sure of that. She was surprised when you stepped forward. I don’t think she’s used to getting help, especially strong help.’

He reddened and bent to fumble at his bootstrap to conceal it.

‘Come downstairs and eat,’ Martine said as though she hadn’t noticed.

The smell of fish frying was coming up from the kitchen. Saliva flooded into his mouth and he was suddenly hungry.

‘I’m ravenous. Come and eat,’ she said again, and this time he came.

It was full dark as they sat down to the table in the kitchen below, and the other lodgers had eaten long ago. But the woman of the house served them, a young squint-eyed red-head called Heron, wearing the brooch that widows in the Last Domain were given a year after their husband’s death.

Heron sat down with them after she served their meals, with a cup of cha warming her hands. Ash ate without paying attention, food to mouth without looking and without tasting.

‘Heron,’ Martine said. ‘That’s an unusual name for a red-head. And we met a blond Vole earlier.’ Ash was

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curious about that, too, but he hoped the woman wouldn't take offence.

'A lot of us in the Last Domain have Traveller names now,' Heron said easily. 'I was named Freyt, but my parents learnt Valuing a good twenty years ago and they renamed me.'

Martine showed her surprise.

'You didn't know?' Heron said, surprised in her turn. 'We're most of us Valuers hereabouts. It's why She's safe here. She's one of us, you know. Raised as a Valuer, for all her father was a warlord.'

They nodded. All the Domains knew that the father of the Well of Secrets had been a warlord, although rumour varied about who, exactly. More than one warlord had smiled when he was asked. None of them wanted to deny it, even those who were reputedly happily married at the requisite time.

Ash realised this explained the strange normality of Oakmere. Only in a Valuer town would the extraordinary powers of a Well of Secrets be housed in an ordinary house. Only in a Valuer town would a true prophet have to pay to have her cleaning done. Because in Valuer philosophy no one person was fundamentally more important than another. All lives Valued equally. Even Travellers. To show they believed it, Valuers took Traveller names. In a Valuer town, charlatans and treasure-seekers would find little to pick over, because Valuers were rarely rich. The rich had no time for a way of thinking that meant they were no better than the nightsoil collector. What was the point of being rich, if that were so?

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Martine was smiling and gestured at her bag of stones to thank Heron for her explanation. 'I could cast for you, if you like.'

Heron shook her head. 'Safred will tell me if there's anything I really need to know. But I give you thanks for the offer.' She collected the empty plates and went out to the scullery, leaving them to contemplate life in a town where their only valuable skill was considered worthless.

Martine shrugged and smiled at Ash. 'Maybe I'll have to learn to cook at last,' she said to him.

He looked at her blankly, realising that he had heard the conversation, but had immediately forgotten it. His mind was still full of the ebb and flow of strange powers; he wondered if he would ever feel such strength again.

Martine sighed. 'Come on, then. Time for bed.'

Ash lay in bed, looking up at the dark ceiling, and went over the healing again in his mind. He had done nothing, he realised. He had just stood there and let his strength be used. Just like he had let Doronit use him. It was why he had left her, because all she wanted to do was use his strength for death and destruction. But she had used him easily before that, because he had felt he had nowhere else to go, nothing to offer the world. She had used him again and again, and he had let her, out of fear and desire and a terror of being cast out into the world on his own. It wasn't like his parents had wanted him. A singer who couldn't sing, a musician who couldn't play – what use was he to his parents, who were consummate performers? That was an old grief, and he forced it away by thinking

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of that moment when strength had flowed out of him to Safred.

Was that all he was good for? Giving his strength away to others – to women? The thought profoundly disturbed him, but he couldn't find an answer. He tried to feel again the power Safred had so easily drawn from him, but had no sense of it within him. Perhaps she had drawn it all away. Or perhaps she had emptied him temporarily and when he was recovered, he would be able to find it again.

He slept uneasily and dreamt of a tall red-headed woman standing in a doorway, nodding encouragingly at him. He took a step towards her.

