

"It is rare to find such a talent." – Peter Watt, author of *Cry of the Curlew*

FOSTER BURTON



# THE HOLLOW'S

Sometimes, revenge is best served by someone else entirely...

# THE HOLLOWS

FOSTER BURTON



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For Belinda — who else?



The characters in this book are entirely fictional  
and have no relation to any living persons

## CHAPTER ONE

JACK LET HIS PICK FALL AGAINST THE SIDE of the trench and arched his back in a stretch. His sunburnt skin crackled like old parchment. The warm breeze offered little relief.

Shielding his eyes beneath the brim of his hat, he looked out over the valley, shrouded under a heat haze like salt spray over the sea. It shimmered at the edges and where it met the ground, bleeding the colour from the lush green fields and flattening the blue of the sky. If he squinted, it made the cattle milling beneath the trees look like half-ton puddles of brown and white and black. ‘Too

bloody hot for this,' he muttered, wiping his brow with the back of his hand.

His older brother, Bill, paused mid-swing with his pick hovering over his shoulder. 'What?'

'Too hot,' Jack repeated. 'Let's take a break. Go for a swim.'

Bill's pick thudded into the ground. Sweat dripped off the end of his nose. 'No,' he grunted, levering it out. 'Gotta finish this before it storms.'

Jack looked up at the glaring sky and scoffed. 'It ain't gonna rain. There's not a cloud in the sky!'

'What do you call that, then?' Bill pointed at the top of the wooded ridge that flanked the valley, where a scattering of grey clouds had gathered in the last hour. 'Feel the air. It's sticky as hell.'

'Doesn't mean it's going to rain,' said Jack, choosing to ignore the way it clung to his skin, thick and full of static.

Before their in depth analysis of the weather could progress any further, their cousin Ed emerged from the bushes and came sauntering down the field towards them. He was older than

Jack but younger than Bill, fitting between the two of them like mortar.

Ed stopped at the edge of the trench. His upper lip glistened with tiny pearls of moisture. His breeches were rolled to the knee. Like the other two, he'd stripped his shirt off hours ago, and his grimey belly jiggled cheerfully in its newfound freedom.

'That was a long piss, Giuseppe,' Jack accused, using the nickname he'd given Ed for his height and olive skin.

Ed shrugged. 'So?'

'You were shirking.'

Ed clambered down into the trench. 'Bugger off.'

Jack changed tack. 'Reckon it's going to rain?'

'Nah,' said Ed, without bothering to look up. Then he saw Bill's expression. 'Actually, maybe.'

Jack shook his head. 'Judas.'

'Come on,' Bill said with a smirk. 'Keep digging. Not far to go.'

'But we're not even halfway,' Jack protested.

'We're over halfway.'

‘How do you know?’

‘I measured it.’

Jack looked back to where they’d started the trench at dawn that morning, up near the three huts nestled at the base of the ridge. They were crude structures of timber and bark with sheet iron roofs. In the haze, they looked like rotten teeth. Then he turned the opposite direction to where the creek wound its way along the valley floor: where they were supposed to finish. It seemed way further. ‘When?’

Bill hawked and spat on the ground, ending the conversation.

They dug for a while in miserable silence. Jack’s swings fell with the consistency of an arrhythmic heartbeat. The hot air dragged at his arms as if he was underwater. It was days like today that made him wish he was bigger than Bill. Then he could tell him to get stuffed and go for a swim like he wanted to. But it was wishful thinking: although only eighteen months separated them, they couldn’t be more physically different. Bill was built like an ox with close-cropped black hair, a bushy

beard, and serious brown eyes. Though equalling him in height, Jack was lean and long-legged, with sandy hair, a wispy beard, and the blue eyes of a dreamer. He wouldn't stand a chance.

His next swing jolted him from his brooding thoughts as the head of the pick clanged against something beneath the surface. Vibrations shot up the handle, drawing a string of curses, leaving pins and needles coursing through his palms.

'What the hell now?' Bill growled, as Jack dropped the pick to shake out his hands.

'Easy, Bill,' Ed said breathlessly. 'His little twig-gies are probably tired.' He gave Jack a sweaty grin. 'Why don't you head on up to the girls and bake us a nice cake – or that lemon slice of Peg's – leave us men to do the work?'

It was a tempting prospect. Jack's wife, Elizabeth, and Bill's wife, Peg, were back at the huts sheltering from the heat of the day. And Peg's slice was famously delicious. But Jack couldn't be the first to quit. 'What, so you can just eat it all?' he retorted.

Ed flushed. 'Bastard.'

*'Bastardo?'*

'I'm not bloody Italian!'

'Your father's Sergio the butcher!' Jack snorted with laughter: Ed's father was their uncle on their Pa's side.

Bill lifted his pick over his head and swung it at the ground with the full force of his strength. The muscles in his back bunched like a snake under a blanket. The handle seemed to bend as it connected. Leaving it buried, he gave them both a dose of his blazing eyes. 'Stop wasting time. Keep digging.'

With a reluctant sigh, Jack dropped to his knees to dig out whatever he'd hit. A quick brush of the loose dirt revealed a rock the size of a small potato. Thunder grumbled from somewhere behind him: glancing over his shoulder, he saw the ridge now lay in shadow.

'Told you,' said Bill.

Jack ignored him. He pried the rock free and turned it over in his hand, wondering how something so small could be such a pain in the arse, but stopped suddenly as a section of it caught the light.

Beneath the grime, a hint of colour peeked out. He scratched at it with his fingernail. More appeared, like a winter's sunset. A shiver ran down his spine. 'Bugger me...'

Something in Jack's voice made Bill stop. 'What is it?'

Jack held it up. 'Look!'

'What is it?' Ed repeated.

Jack scrambled to his feet, passing it to Bill. 'Gold!'

Bill rubbed it against his breeches, then brought it closer to his face. 'Could be pyrite.'

'*Pirate* gold?' Jack's jaw dropped. 'Like treasure? All the way out here?'

Bill glanced at Ed. They burst out laughing. '*Py-rite*, dickhead. Fool's gold.'

'Look at the colour of it!' Jack cried. 'Ain't nothing foolish about that.'

'Doesn't mean it's not pyrite.'

Ed held out his hand. 'Give us a look?'

'No!' Jack snatched it from Bill. 'It's mine. I found it.'

'On our land,' Bill countered.



‘That we don’t even own yet,’ said Jack, taking a step back.

‘That means the government owns it, not you.’ Ed said. His empty hand fell by his side. ‘Just wait till they find out you’ve got it.’

‘What, are you going to tell them?’

‘Maybe.’

Bill shot Ed a harsh look. ‘Don’t even joke about that. We’ll own it soon enough.’

Jack laughed scornfully. ‘Is that before or after they come to evict us?’

Bill’s face darkened. For the last five years, he’d shouldered the full responsibility of turning this wild stretch of valley into income producing farmland, all the while with the risk of discovery and eviction hanging over their heads. It was just bad luck they were squatters right when the government was trying to outlaw it. ‘You’re a real prick,’ he growled. ‘You know that?’

‘I’m just saying,’ said Jack, ‘how many more cows we gotta sell before we’ve got enough money? A hundred? Two hundred? It’ll take ten years.’

‘Don’t be a bloody fool. Two years, if that.’

‘*Two years?* Bugger that. We could buy it ten times over with this.’ Jack held up the nugget again. ‘It’s gotta be worth a thousand pounds, at least.’ He’d never dig again.

Ed looked doubtful. ‘You reckon?’

Bill snorted. ‘Hundred pounds, tops.’

‘A *hundred* pounds!’ Jack was horrified. ‘You’ve lost your mind!’

‘Thirty quid each,’ Ed said wistfully. ‘Can you imagine?’

‘Giuseppe, shut up – it’s worth way more! And who said you get a share?’

‘It ain’t even that big,’ Bill said. ‘Gold prices peaked in the sixties.’

A roll of thunder boomed overhead, drawing their attention. Dark clouds, pregnant with rain, had blown closer on the westerly and now lingered overhead.

Bill scowled at Jack. ‘What did I tell you? Put it away. We can figure out what to do with it later.’

Jack went to protest, but saw Bill’s expression. Better to save the fight for then. He wrapped the

nugget in his shirt and left it on the grass, then re-joined the other two.

They dug with fresh urgency, hurried along by scattered fat raindrops and strong gusts of wind. Twenty minutes later, the great clouds burst. In an instant, the air turned to solid grey walls of liquid and the ridge disappeared. It lashed their sunburnt skin and soaked through their breeches, wilting the brims of their hats so they could barely see.

‘Push!’ Bill shouted over the roar. ‘Come on! Push!’ He led by example, whirling his pick like an ancient weapon of war, cutting a scythe through the torrent.

A bolt of lightning crackled over the ridge, lighting up the valley. Trees thrashed wildly. Leaves swirled through the gloom. The cattle huddled miserably beneath.

‘Push!’

The creek began to rise. The trickle became a rush. The holes filled with water faster than they could clear them.

‘Push!’

With a final heave, they breached the bank.

‘Let’s go!’

Jack grabbed his shirt, laughing maniacally as he slipped in the treacherous mud, then ran off after the other two.



THEY GATHERED around the table in Bill’s hut, lit by the soft light of an oil lamp. It was a single room a bit over eight yards square with a door that led out to the verandah. A bed and dresser stood in one corner, a wood stove and bench against the opposite. The table was in the middle of the room.

‘It’s hammering down!’ Jack said, raising his voice over the drumming on the roof. ‘Lucky we finished the trench.’ He turned to Elizabeth, whose swollen belly almost touched the table. ‘We would have finished sooner, but Bill kept stopping for breaks.’

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. ‘Did he just?’

‘Bugger off,’ Bill muttered, as he stood and cracked one of the shutters. Outside, dusk had

fallen, casting the fields in a thousand shades of grey. Over the downpour came the sound of water flowing in the trench, and he grunted with satisfaction. 'It's working.'

'Better be,' Jack said, picking a callous on his palm. He winced as it came free, flicking it away, then leant over to rub Elizabeth's stomach. 'How you feeling, my love?'

Elizabeth's fair skin was flushed pink, deepening the green of her eyes as she gave Jack a sorry look. 'Big.'

'Big is better.'

Ed, sitting on Elizabeth's other side, leant forward with his pinky finger cocked. 'You wish.'

Peg turned from the stove, their five month-old son, David, bouncing on her hip. She was the taller of the two sisters, brown-eyed and honey-coloured for Elizabeth's fairness, with deep brown eyes for Elizabeth's green. 'Edward Thomas, don't be vulgar.'

'*Giuseppe*,' Jack corrected.

'Sorry, Peg.' Ed waited for her to turn, then did it again. That raised a chuckle out of Bill.

‘I saw that.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Sorry only means something if you don’t do it again, Edward,’ Peg said sternly.

‘*Giuseppe.*’

Peg set down the ladle and turned to frown at Jack. ‘I don’t know why you call him that.’

‘Because look at him?’

‘It’s a silly nickname. It makes no sense.’

Jack let it go. He didn’t like to argue with Peg. She was firm and opinionated, her approach to life far too practical and organised for his liking. Even if Ed *was* Italian *and* named Giuseppe, she still wouldn’t agree.

Peg served up the steaming bowls, laden with potatoes and spiced with thyme and garlic. It smelt heavenly. They bowed their heads. Bill led grace. He thanked God for their land, for family and for health. He thanked God for keeping them safe, then for their cattle and freedom. He thanked God for Peg’s cooking, for Elizabeth’s growing baby, and asked for a wife for Ed. The prayer went on for

a long time; Bill thanked God for just about everything except the gold.

Jack fingered the misshapen lump in his pocket with his stomach in knots, barely hearing a word of it. As they chorused amen, he found he could no longer contain himself. 'Guess what I found?' he announced.

Bill frowned. 'Wait till after tea.'

'I should be allowed to tell them – I found it.'

'Found what?' Elizabeth asked; even Peg looked up with interest.

'Just wait till after tea. Peg's been cooking all afternoon.'

'You'll have to tell us now,' Peg said. 'It's not fair to make us wait.'

'Truly not fair!'

Jack looked at Bill, shrugged, then dug the nugget out of his pocket, placing it in the middle of the table where it caught the lamplight and glowed. The girl's eyes widened. As did Jack's grin.

'Is it...?' Elizabeth started.

'Yep.'

Peg looked sceptical. 'Where?'

‘Near the creek. I hit it with my pick.’

Peg leant over and poked it with her finger. It rocked gently, dropping a halo of brown flecks on the tablecloth. ‘Is it real?’

‘We don’t know,’ said Bill. ‘Could be pyrite, for all—’

‘It’s real,’ Jack interrupted. ‘I’d bet my left nut on it.’

‘Jack!’ Peg covered David’s ears. ‘How many times do I need to tell you? I will not have David growing up around such *revolting* conversation.’

‘Yeah, Jack,’ said Ed, pinky finger up.

Jack pointed at Ed indignantly. ‘But what about Giusep— Ed? He just did it again!’

‘No, I didn’t!’ Ed slipped his hand under the table.

Peg sighed, as if Jack was her disappointing child. ‘I’m not talking about what Edward did or didn’t do. I’m talking about your language around your nephew.’

Jack turned to Ed. ‘You’re a filthy rotten liar. Sergio would be ashamed.’

‘Whose Sergio?’ Peg asked.



Ed scowled. 'Go to Hell!'

Jack laughed. 'All I'm saying is it's gotta be real,' he said, picking up where he left off. 'Look at the colour of it.'

Bill swallowed his mouthful. 'You don't know that.'

'Yes, I do.'

Rain pattered on the roof. Steam curled from the bowls. A tense air hung over the table. Elizabeth reached over and picked it up, an awkward movement over her belly. 'How much do you think it is worth?' she asked, cradling it in her palm.

'Five hundred pounds,' Jack answered quickly. He didn't think Bill's dreadful estimate was worth repeating.

Bill did. 'A hundred pounds, tops.'

'A hundred pounds!' Elizabeth tightened her grip. It was more money than they'd seen in a long while. 'What are we going to do with it?'

The hut was muggy from the wood stove. Sweat glistened on Bill's forehead as he frowned

into his bowl. 'I don't think we do anything with it.'

'What?' Jack sat up in his seat. 'That's not what you said... you didn't say—'

'Think about it,' said Bill, cutting him off. 'If you take it to Brisbane and try to flog it, they'll want to know where it came from. Something that big, you're gonna have to say it came from somewhere, or they'll lock you up for stealing.'

'So?' said Jack. 'I'll tell them where I got it. Ain't nothing illegal about finding gold.'

'Jacky-Boy...' Bill gave him a scornful look. 'We've spoken about this. We don't own this land yet. We're *squatters*, remember? Fine in the old days, but now...' He didn't need to finish.

'They won't know that,' Jack said dismissively, barely keeping the anger from his voice. 'And I won't be bloody telling them, will I?'

'Language!' Peg snapped, jabbing her fork in his direction.

'Maybe not right away,' said Bill, 'but they sure as hell will when they start sniffing around, wondering where you found a thing like that.'

Jack's stomach twisted in frustration. Bill wasn't exactly wrong.

'We're squatters, plain and simple,' Bill said, driving his point home. 'We're not supposed to be here, and it's only by God's good graces and how far we are from anywhere that we ain't been discovered. If you take that' – he pointed at the nugget – 'to Brisbane and sell it, they'll be out here taking this land quicker than you can blink. You'll cause a bloody gold rush.'

Jack looked expectantly at Peg, but she didn't mention Bill's cussing. It raised his anger a notch. 'Who? Who's gonna take it from us?'

Bill slammed his fist on the table. The bowls jumped. David whimpered. '*Everyone!*' He took a deep breath, lowering his voice. 'Don't you remember Pa's stories about the southern goldfields? He said it was mayhem. Every man and his dog, thousands of them, tearing that place to pieces. Do you really want to bring that out here? Really?' The question hung in the air.

Jack didn't have an answer. He never thought that far ahead. It was always too depressing.

Bill leant back, folding his arms across his chest. 'I say bury it beneath your hut and forget about it for a while. We've already got a good plan – the same plan we've had for the last five years. When we've got enough money from the cattle, we'll buy the land. Just like we've always said.'

Jack couldn't believe what he was hearing. 'Just like *you've* always said.'

Bill's voice softened. 'Come on, mate, think about it... We're so close. Another year or so and we'll have enough. Then the land will finally be ours. Can't you at least wait until then? Then you can do whatever you want with it. What do you reckon, Ed?'

Ed fiddled with his fork, then nodded slowly.

Jack reached over and took the nugget from Elizabeth. It was solid and cool, yet soft at the same time. In its own ungainly way it was beautiful. Even the idea of locking it away or burying it was criminal. His anger burned just beneath the surface, but he knew if he let it show, he'd lose all hope of Bill seeing reason. 'What if we...?' he started, then stopped. He'd been hoping that

something would pop into his head. 'What if we—'

'Wrote to Papa and asked for his advice?' Elizabeth smoothly intervened.

All three men recoiled as if they'd been struck.

'Hell, no.' Bill shook his head.

'Yeah, bugger that,' said Jack, transported back five years to the night they'd fled the girls' father's estate after his refusal to allow them to marry. 'The old dog would be the first in line to tear this place from us. Give him a chance to get us back.'

A look passed between Peg and Elizabeth.

'Surely he'd have forgiven us by now,' Elizabeth said. 'It's been years.'

Bill chuckled. 'Un-bloody-likely. He gave us those jobs as a favour to Pa and we ran off with his daughters. No man worth his salt forgets that.'

'He gave *you two* those jobs as favours,' Ed corrected. 'I got mine off my own merit.'

'Yours was an act of charity,' Jack said. 'He saw how hard it was for a man fresh off the boat to land a job.'

Ed ignored Jack's jibe. 'I was a good worker.'

‘Until you flogged his wagon,’ said Bill.

‘And his horses and whiskey,’ Jack added, lifting his fingers. ‘Salt, rope, nails, books – what else was there?’

‘He’s not *that* cruel,’ Peg interjected, rising to her father’s defence. ‘We needed those things to survive. And it’s not like he couldn’t afford to lose them.’

‘Rich fellas take it way worse than poor folk do,’ Bill said.

‘We only ran because he forbade us to see you. We had no choice. He’d understand now. He was in love once...’ There was pain in Peg’s voice, and her eyes dropped to David.

‘So it’s agreed,’ Bill said, steering the topic back. ‘We’re doing nothing with it for now.’

‘We didn’t agree to anything!’ Jack protested.

‘I think we did. Ed?’

Ed looked at Bill, then at Jack. ‘I mean, I get both arguments,’ he said carefully. ‘Bill does make a good point: we don’t want to draw attention to the valley, especially not before we own it...’

Jack scowled.

‘But, I also see reason for selling it too.’

Jack grinned.

‘Think about it, Bill,’ Ed continued, ‘if we sold it and didn’t say anything about where it came from, we could use the money to buy the land sooner. And if there was any left over, we could buy more cattle and equipment. Your plan is good, Bill – always has been – I’m just saying this could help, that’s all.’

Bill linked his fingers under his chin. They disappeared into the thick of his beard. He gazed thoughtfully at Ed, then shook his head. ‘No.’

‘No?’

‘No.’

The rain had almost stopped. Random drops splattered against the tin. Jack’s eyes narrowed. Bill noticed, and gave him a challenging look in return. Elizabeth saw what was unfolding and placed a steadying hand on Jack’s leg, but he brushed it aside. Bill’s stupidity was about to cost him his riches. He stood and leant forward on the table. It creaked under his weight. ‘Don’t be so bloody stu-

pid,' he hissed, the words dripping with fury. 'Of course we're going to sell it! Who even needs your damned cows when we've got a valley full of—'

'Jack!' Elizabeth tugged at the bottom of his shirt.

Jack whirled around and glared at her. She shook her head. He could see the disappointment in her eyes.

'Nah, it's alright Lizzy. Let him speak.' Bill unfolded his arms and rose from his seat. 'I'd love to hear more of what Jacky-Boy's got to say.'

Jack swallowed the hard lump in his throat, and met Bill's eyes. 'We need to sell it,' he said, trying to sound reasonable. 'We'll never get another opportunity like this again.'

'Why? Tell me, why do we *need* to?' Bill asked. '*You* need to, more like it – so damned hellbent on getting rich. Why not be happy with what we've got. Look around you.' He gestured around the room, becoming angry. 'You've got a great woman, great family, great mates, freedom, no one to tell us what to do – hell, no one even knows we're here –



but you always want bloody more, don't you?' He glared at Jack. 'What is wrong with you?'

The words whipped around Jack like a strong wind. The spark in his chest flared into a blaze. He clenched his fists, knuckles rasping against the rough timber. He wanted to flip the table and punch Bill in his damn mouth.

But to his surprise, the fire in Bill's eyes softened, and he lowered himself stiffly into his chair. Jack knew not to feel triumphant. Bill never gave in that easily.

'There ain't no point fighting about it,' Bill said, shrugging it off. 'We've got a plan and we're sticking with it. That there' – he pointed to the nugget – 'changes nothing. Cattle are stable, cattle is the plan. Just like it's been since we first got here.' His eyes came to rest on Jack. A small spark flickered behind them, and Jack's heart sank. 'Best bury it, or throw it in the river – even melt it down and make Lizzy a nice set of earrings, but we ain't selling it. At least not yet.'

Then Bill smiled. His teeth were very white

against the black of his beard. He scooped a mouthful of cold stew and slurped it from the spoon. 'Bloody good tucker, love,' he said around his mouthful.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, ED AND JACK lit a small fire outside to boil the billy. The sun had just risen but already it was warming up. The dew on the grass shone like a million diamonds.

‘Gonna be hot again,’ Jack said, dropping the thin cotton blanket off his shoulders.

‘Mmm.’

‘Want some damper?’

‘Mmm-hmm.’

Jack left it at that. Ed didn’t talk much in the morning.

He kneaded the dough into a rough circle, adding a pinch of salt. ‘Billy’s ready.’

Ed pulled it off the fire and swung it in a lazy circle, pushing the leaves to the bottom. He popped the lid and smelt it, then held it out to Jack. Steam trickled out of the spout.

Jack sniffed it. 'Good.'

While Ed poured the tea, Jack placed the damper on the grate. Fire began to lick its undersides, and within seconds he could smell its delicious aroma. He thought back to last night's conversation. Bill hadn't relented, despite the other four's differing opinion, and Jack had gone to bed angry. He'd laid in bed fuming; even considered saddling Pepper and riding for Brisbane, until Elizabeth had talked him out of it, making him promise not to do anything rash. It was so damn frustrating. 'Hey, Ed?'

'Yeah?'

'Do you really think it's a bad idea to sell the—'

At that moment, the door of Bill's hut creaked open. Ed looked guiltily over his shoulder. Jack swore under his breath. 'Never mind.'

Bill came out onto the verandah and stretched his arms above his head, then trudged slowly down

the steps. They both watched him warily, unsure whether they were getting friend or foe.

‘What?’ said Bill, lowering himself onto a log. ‘Didja’s get eyes for Christmas?’

Ed, smothering a grin, handed him one of the steaming mugs.

Bill blew on it, then took a small sip. ‘So I did some thinking,’ he said, setting the mug aside. ‘And I reckon we should sell it.’

Jack’s heart leapt, then he frowned. It could be a cruel trick to get back at him for last night’s performance. ‘You’re taking the piss...’

‘Nope.’

Jack searched Bill’s face for any sign of deception, but found none. ‘What did Peg say to you last night? Or what did she *do*?’

Ed guffawed and looked at Bill, waiting for the explosion.

‘She didn’t say anything,’ Bill said, glassing over it. ‘I gave it some more thought, that’s all. Ed’s right. We could use the money, and I’m sick of having eviction hanging over our heads. We ain’t really free until we own it.’

‘That’s what I was trying to—’

‘Yeah, that’s what you were trying to say, I know. But sometimes you ain’t too good at saying it how it’s supposed to be said.’

Jack shrugged. It wasn’t untrue.

‘But if you’re gonna do it, there’s conditions. And they ain’t negotiable, so don’t even bother trying to argue.’

Jack nodded.

‘Ed? You saw that didn’t you?’

‘Yep.’

‘Good. First condition’ – Bill nodded toward the fire – ‘get that damper off before you overcook it.’

‘But it’ll be...’ Jack cut himself off, and grinning sheepishly, lifted it off. He’d prefer undercooked damper and a pocketful of cash.

‘That’s better.’ Bill became serious. ‘Now, firstly, if you’re so hellbent on selling it, you’re going yourself – and not to Beaudesert – they’ll give you piss for it. You gotta go to Brisbane.’

Jack tried to hide his elation and nodded. The thought of being back in the city amongst the

people and the towering buildings was terribly exciting.

‘Second: Ed’s staying with me. We’ve gotta keep this place running.’

Ed looked crestfallen.

‘Third?’ Jack prompted.

‘With the money you get, the first thing you’re buying is the land. You’ll need to go to the land agent’s office to do it. It’ll be a pound an acre. You can get up to three-hundred acres from memory, but I don’t reckon you’ll get that much for it.’

Jack wondered how Bill even knew that, but didn’t bother to ask. He always knew these things.

Bill waved his mug towards the fields on the other side of the creek. ‘If you get enough, try to get that side too. The more the better.’

‘Yep.’

‘And do what Ed said: make up a place where you found it. I don’t care if it’s bloody Tasmania – just don’t say you found it anywhere near here.’

‘Yep.’

‘And don’t use your real name, only on the ac-

tual land title. Not when you sell it, or to anyone else you meet along the way. Got it?’

‘Yep.’

‘I’m serious, Jack – if so much as one bloke rides up here sniffing for gold, I’ll shoot him dead. Then you, next.’

A smile tugged at Jack’s lips. ‘That it?’

‘No. The rest of the money we’ve saved is staying here with me. Ain’t no point sending it all with you in case something happens along the way.’

‘How much is there?’ Ed asked.

‘Hundred and thirteen quid.’

‘Blimey. Not bad.’

Jack quickly agreed. He liked the thought of being solely responsible for the purchase of the land.

Bill went on to outline a list of supplies he needed from Brisbane. Ed did too, and by the time they were done the billy was empty, the damper little more than a pile of floury crumbs.

David squawked in the background, signalling Bill’s departure, and he stood, though lingered a



moment before walking off. 'Every part of me still thinks this is a bad idea,' he said, looking between the two of them. 'Don't ask me why, but my guts off on it, and I want you both to hear me say it.'

Jack's smile burst free. 'Don't worry too much, Bill – I'm sure ya guts'll feel better with a pocketful of cash.'



DAWN BROKE SOFTLY the next morning, overcast with thin clouds that veiled the splendour of the sunrise. The old wagon sat out the front of the huts, packed with a straw mattress and enough supplies for the three-day journey to Brisbane. Its canvas had been patched so many times that no one remembered its original colour, though, even if it had needed replacing they would never have had the spare money anyway.

Jack led the mules in from the field and with Bill's help, harnessed them, then hitched them to

the wagon. 'Fresh this morning,' he said, pulling the strap tight.

'Who needs a barometer?' Bill muttered. He rechecked Jack's work and made a minor adjustment. 'Did you grease the hubs?'

'Yep.'

'Like I showed you?'

'Yep.'

'Do it again when you arrive. Grease is in the box.'

'You already told me.'

'Just don't forget. You'll bugger the wagon. Gonna see Ma or Uncle Michael while you're in town?'

'Yeah, hopefully,' Jack lied; he hadn't even thought of it.

'And visit Pa's grave?'

'Yeah, course.' That lie was harder. Jack felt a prickle of guilt.

'Good. And don't forget what I told you, use a—'

'Fake name, I won't forget,' Jack said, cutting

him off. He wasn't in the mood to be lectured and was keen to get on the road. 'Be back in a sec.'

He left Bill and walked behind the huts, where his palomino mare was cropping the grass in the yards. He whistled softly. Pepper lifted her head, ears flicking towards him, then wandered over and poked her head over the rail. 'Hullo, pretty,' Jack greeted her. She nuzzled his chest, her wet nostrils leaving streaks on his shirt. 'I've got to go away for a while.' He stroked her forehead, dotted with spots that had earned her her name. 'Sorry I have to take those two stupid old things – I promise it's only this once.' Pepper snorted and threw her head, unimpressed. 'Ok, ok, hold on.' He dug in his pocket for a sugar cube, which she gobbled from his hand. 'Better?' He gave her one more, petting her neck as she ate it. 'Alright, greedy. I've got to go. Behave yourself, alright?' She swished her tail and wandered off.

He rejoined Bill and Ed just as Peg followed Elizabeth out of the hut, carrying Elizabeth's bag in one hand, and David in the other.

'Oh, Lizzy, are you sure you should be going in

your condition?’ Peg said as they came down the steps.

Elizabeth smiled back at her older sister. ‘I’ll be fine, Peggy. We’re only gone a week.’

‘You’re seven months pregnant, child.’

‘You rode until you were at least eight, and Davey seems to be alright.’

Peg shifted David to her other arm, then lifted the bag into the back of the wagon. ‘At least promise me that if anything doesn’t feel right, you’ll turn around and come straight back.’

‘*Peggy!*’

‘Promise me.’

‘Come on,’ Jack said. ‘Time to go.’

Elizabeth stepped forward to give Peg an awkward hug around her stomach. She only came to Peg’s chin. ‘Alright, I promise.’

Peg gave Jack a fierce look over the top of Elizabeth’s head. ‘You too, Jack. Promise me.’

‘Yeah, whatever. Fine. Come on, Lizzy, up you hop.’

He helped Elizabeth climb up onto the seat, where she spread her legs wide against the foot-

board and sighed. Peg hovered anxiously at her knee. 'Are you comfortable?'

Elizabeth squeezed her sister's hand. 'Stop worrying. I'll see you in a week.'

They bid their farewells, then Jack flicked the reins. With a mournful groan, the wagon trundled off towards Beaudesert.

'So long!' Elizabeth cried, waving her hat above her head. 'See you soon!'



IT REMAINED BLESSEDLY cool throughout the morning, much to Jack and Elizabeth's delight. It was the first time they'd been away from the others in almost five years, and Jack found himself in the undisputed position of leader. He liked the feeling: there was no Bill to tell him off, or Peg to scold him.

As they bumped along, his mind roamed through the unlimited opportunities that came with his discovery, though only one of them kept

repeating itself: use the money to find more gold. He leant over, draping his arm casually around Elizabeth's shoulders. 'You mark my words, Lizzy, there's more gold up the ridge,' he murmured.

'Do you really think so?' she asked, her eyes widening.

He turned to look at her seriously. 'I know so. I can feel it in my blood. If there's more gold, I'll find it – trust me.'

They came out of the valley onto the grasslands that led to Innisplain. The change in scenery was drastic. Here, it was flat, and they could see far into the distance, with endless browns for the valley's greens, and tans and ochres instead of the cool greys of volcanic rock.

'It's beautiful,' said Elizabeth.

Jack glanced across at her and frowned. 'Were you even listening to what I said?'

She smiled guiltily. 'Sorry, I was daydreaming. What were you saying?'

'I was saying that when I've made a hundred thousand or so, I'm going to see your pa and make him an offer to buy the stud. What do you

think?’ He gave her a whimsical smile, blue eyes sparkling.

Elizabeth pondered over her answer. ‘I think...’

‘What?’

‘I think that after the way Papa reacted last time he saw you, he’ll take to you with his shotgun!’ She burst into laughter, rocking back on the seat. Her tummy jiggled, cheeks flushing a darker shade of pink. ‘Oh, he was so mad, don’t you remember? Goodness, I’ve never seen him angry like that before!’

Jack laughed, more for her benefit than humour. The memory was still sour in his mind. ‘He’s a tyrant.’

‘He’s not that bad!’

‘Is too.’

‘Oh, Jack—’

‘Lizzy,’ Jack cut her off. ‘Let me tell you something. Never in my life have I seen a man put fear into Bill like your pa did that day. *Never*. I thought Bill was going to soil himself right there in his study.’ His voice was harsh: for him and Bill, it had been the ultimate humiliation, rejection when

asking for his daughters' hands. 'He's a damned bloody tyrant. I don't ever want to see him again.'

Elizabeth's hand dropped to her belly. 'But what about when the...' She trailed off, changing the subject. 'He liked you boys, he said so himself.'

Jack snorted. 'Liked us? He *hated* us. If my old man's horseshoes didn't win so many races, there's no way he would have hired us.'

'He liked you! Truly, he did.'

Jack turned on the seat to face her. 'Lizzy, I love you. Let me start with that. But he's a rotten old bastard, through and through.'

'You would be too if you lost your wife, then both your daughters.'

'He was a bastard long before that.'

The wagon bounced along the twin strips of track, clanking and jingling the halters. Shafts of sunlight peeked through the clouds, lining the trees with silver. In the field on their right, a herd of cows stared as they rolled past. Jack's anger evaporated quickly. It wasn't Elizabeth's fault her father was like he was, and besides, he had won: right now she was by his side, carrying his child, instead of



locked away in his lonely homestead. He took her hand. 'I'm sorry Lizzy, I know you miss him. I didn't mean to be cruel.'

Elizabeth smiled. 'You're forgiven.'

'I still can't believe you actually came.'

'We nearly didn't.' Elizabeth's smile faded. 'We were so close to not coming... so close you wouldn't believe.' Her eyes softened to emerald, for the memories carried pain of which she rarely spoke. 'But we thought of Ma and how she loved Pa... neither of us could bear the thought of living any other way... Oh, Jack!' She slid her body across the wooden bench seat, throwing her arms around him. Her eyes were squeezed shut, but a single tear still managed to escape. 'Never, ever leave me,' she whispered against his chest.

Jack stroked her hair, breathing in the warm soapy smell. 'I'm not going anywhere, Lizzy.'

'Promise?'

'On my life.'



THEY STOPPED at Innisplain around midday, a small scattering of farms and a tin hut housing the general store, and after watering the mules, they shared a lunch of bread and tea and were back on the road within the hour.

Jack became impatient as the settlement fell away behind them, whipping the mules into a trot. The morning dew had kept the dust low, but now it fluffed out from under the clattering wheels to drift off sideways in the wind.

‘Come on, you stupid things,’ he muttered, rocking forward on the edge of the seat as if his movement would urge more speed. The wagon creaked and shuddered like a ship breaking up on the rocks. Their belongings crashed around in the back.

Within a mile, the mules were blowing hard, their shaggy coats matted with sweat. Jack backed off a touch, glancing across at Elizabeth as they slowed. He felt a flutter of alarm: her face was clammy and drained of colour. ‘Lizzy? You alright?’

She swallowed. 'Sorry... What did you say? Could you slow down a bit?'

Jack tried to hide his frustration, again pulling back on the reins. 'Better?'

'Thank you.'

The next hour passed slowly. Elizabeth fell into a broken sleep. Her head bounced softly against Jack's shoulder, her hands cradled under her belly. Loose strands of hair whipped carelessly around her face.

Jack stared out at the scenery, trying to pass the time. The plains were terribly boring, the purple ranges still too distant to be of any interest, so he turned his mind to the gold, knotting his stomach with excitement. Hidden in his rucksack was the answer to his hopes and dreams. Within months, he could be richer than he ever thought possible; already, the memory of farming was fading. Thinking about it added to his impatience, and he glanced down at Elizabeth's head. Sure she was lost to her slumber, he gently flicked the reins.



THEY FOUND a clearing just off the track as the sun began to set. They'd covered just over fifteen miles. Jack had wanted to cover thirty, but he didn't say it twice.

Jack unhitched the mules, then after gathering sticks and dried leaves, lit a small fire.

'How are you feeling?' he asked Elizabeth, putting on one of the bigger logs.

Elizabeth sat with her back against a tree, hands resting on her stomach. Her eyes were ringed with dark smudges, and she gave him a weary smile. 'The baby's kicking my bladder. I like sitting on your oilskin though. The smell reminds me of winter.'

He went to the wagon to fetch the cooking pot. 'Do you think she'll look like you or me?' he asked over his shoulder.

'How can you be sure it's a *she*?'

'I can feel it in my loins.'

Elizabeth giggled. 'Gold with your blood, ba-

bies with your loins... What a marvellous husband you are.'

After a meal of damper and canned beans, Jack helped Elizabeth up into the wagon, where she lay down on the mattress fully clothed and immediately fell asleep.

Jack wandered back over to the fire, not yet tired enough for sleep. The breeze had fallen away, leaving a still summer's eve. Cicadas buzzed. Fruit bats screeched. The river was black and glassy. After pouring a whiskey and lighting his pipe with a stick from the fire, he got comfortable, then let his mind run free.

He thought about gold and money. He thought about more gold and more money: piles of gold sovereigns stacked in neat little rows on a leather-topped desk, stamped with his profile like one of the ancient kings. He pictured the fields of Clear Water Valley covered in columns of digging men, uncovering nuggets the size of melons ready to be plucked up and converted into more gold sovereigns. The stacks on the desk grew so high

that they tumbled over into a pile, which he lay spread-eagled atop.

He thought of the grand white house he would build, twice as large as Elizabeth's father's and three times as grand. It would be three stories high with wraparound verandahs and a gravel driveway lined with pencil pines, finishing in a roundabout with a water feature in the middle. There would be gardens of all-seasonal flowers and long sweeping lawns bordered neatly by a picket fence, with a team of gardeners in his employ, and a butler to call him *sir*.

There would be parties, too. The driveway, lit by lanterns, would be crammed with the stagecoaches of high society; his own, glossy white and the best by far, parked at the head. Beautiful women in bright coloured gowns and men in tails would flock to him. The men would nod respectfully. The women would shoot daggers at Elizabeth when she wasn't looking. And when the night would grow late, he'd lead the men into an oak-panelled drawing room where a fire roared in the hearth. They'd smoke

cigars while the men asked his opinions on stocks and trades and what was going to happen with the booming Australian economy. Jack would swirl his crystal glass of brandy, pausing before he answered.

He pictured himself sitting down the next morning in a monogrammed silk dressing gown, to a buffet of fruits and eggs and creamy coffee. He'd ask for the paper: *There you are, sir*. On the front page would be a portrait of his family standing in front of their mansion, under the headline *Australia's New Aristocrats*. He'd smile to himself, while Elizabeth scolded the children for eating too fast.

His pipe gurgled and went out, drawing him back to the present. His belly glowed and his soul was warm as he tapped it out on the log, then threw the remains of his whiskey on the fire, and headed off to bed.

## CHAPTER THREE

THEY SET OFF AGAIN AT DAYBREAK. THE sky was clear save for a scattering of silky clouds that turned orange and then gold as the sun began to rise. By mid-morning, they'd vanished.

'It's so hot,' Jack muttered, wiping his forehead. His shirt was damp and clung to his back. He wished the wagon had a shade over the seat. Squinting his eyes, in the distance he could see a haze across the horizon, though it was thicker and greyer than from heat. He sniffed the air. 'Something's burning.'

'Is it?' said Elizabeth.

As the temperature rose, so did the headache



behind Jack's eyes. He opened the water canteen and offered it to Elizabeth, then waved it in front of her face when she didn't respond. 'Lizzy?'

Elizabeth's head jolted as if coming out of a trance. Jack glanced at her and felt a stab of worry. Her skin had taken on a greenish tinge, her eyes red-rimmed and glazed. He slowed the mules to a stop. Their dust clouded around them like fine mist. 'You alright?'

Elizabeth forced a smile. 'Yes, yes, I'm fine. Just tired, that's all.' Her voice was barely a whisper.

Jack peered ahead down the track, two rough brown lines slithering off into the distance. There was nowhere to stop. He brushed a strand of hair off her cheek. 'What do you need?'

'Nothing my love. Keep going. I'll be ok.'

Jack warred with himself. Stop, or push on? He told himself the sooner they got to Brisbane, the more comfortable she'd be; better than out here in the bush, anyway. His conscience tugged the other way, reminding him of his promise to Peg. He told it to shut up. 'You sure?' he asked.

Elizabeth nodded, then lifted her face for a kiss.

He leant down and brushed her lips. They were as coarse as sandpaper.

‘Yah, hup!’ Jack flicked the reins. The wagon rolled away.

An hour passed. The mules panted. Elizabeth didn’t stir. Up ahead, a shaded clearing beneath a cluster of ironbark trees came into view, where the river rejoined the road.

‘Bugger it,’ said Jack, and turned the mules towards it.

The wagon rolled to a stop beside a ring of stones with old ash from a fire. An empty can with its label removed stared up at them blankly.

He shook Elizabeth’s shoulder gently. ‘Lizzy. Wake up.’

Elizabeth groaned, blinking dust from her eyes as she opened them. ‘Oh my word... my back.’ She looked around in confusion. ‘Where are we?’

‘Somewhere between Innisplain and Beaudesert. You’ve been asleep for a while. I thought we could stop. It’s too hot. We can keep going when it cools.’

Elizabeth’s legs gave out as Jack helped her

down from the wagon. She cried out in pain and grabbed at his shirt, and he lowered her down gently until she leant against the wheel.

He took off his hat and started fanning her face. 'What do you need?'

She looked up at him vacantly, taking slow and laboured breaths. 'I—' Her face twisted in pain, her hands clutching at her stomach. She choked back a sob. 'I think my waters have broken.'

Now Jack noticed that the front of her skirts were soaking wet. The sight made him nauseous. 'But... it's too soon... isn't it?'

'Sometimes they come ear—' A second stab of pain made Elizabeth cry out, and she took a couple of deep breaths until it passed. 'I wish Peg was here,' she whispered.

Jack stared at her dumbly. He didn't want to believe it. Not here. Not now. Not when he was so close to his fortune. His mind began to torture him. He had no idea how to birth a child. He'd barely paid attention when helping Bill with the calves, and when Peg had given birth to David he'd fled the second he'd heard that first scream. A

cold sweat broke out on his skin. 'We can turn around, try make it back?' he suggested, trying to keep the panic from his voice. 'Like we promised Peg?'

Elizabeth shook her head. The small movement made her wince. 'We don't have that much time.'

Despite the situation, Jack felt a glimmer of relief. If they could get through this, they could still be in Brisbane tomorrow, where he could sell the gold, then check her into a nice hotel; and he'd be a father! 'Alright,' he nodded, confidence returning to his voice. 'What do you need?'

Elizabeth tried to shift position, but gave up with her legs straight out in front of her. 'Water.'

After giving her a drink, Jack stood and paced to the edge of the clearing. He looked left, then right, but the track was empty. No one was coming to save him. He felt his chest constrict as his fear gripped him like a vice. He tried to imagine how Elizabeth must feel, how scared she must be, but it did nothing to ease its hold.

His weakness made his anger flare, and he

kicked the discarded can, sending it clanging against a tree. 'Damn it to Hell!'

He could feel Elizabeth's eyes on his back, and immediately felt ashamed. 'Why don't you unhitch the mules,' he heard her say. 'I think we're going to be here a while.'

Avoiding her eyes, but thankful for the instruction, he loosened their harnesses and led them to the river to drink, before turning them out to graze.

'How is it?' Jack asked, rejoining back at her side.

Elizabeth smiled bravely. 'It's okay.' Another wave came and she clenched her teeth, but it passed quickly. She placed her hand in his. Her palm was damp and clammy. 'Please won't you spread the oilskin and help me onto it?'

Jack went around the back of the wagon with tears stinging his eyes. He knew he had no right to cry, yet here the tears were, ready to prove his incompetence. He grabbed the oilskin and hurried back, laying it out beside her. 'Ready?'

Elizabeth face froze in pain as he lifted her, the little blue veins at her temples bulging as she sank back and closed her eyes.

A fly landed on her face to steal her moisture. Jack swatted it away with unnecessary force, filled with a sudden urge to get up and flee. The irony of the situation was painfully obvious, and he hated himself for his cowardice.

‘It’s ok my love, don’t panic,’ Elizabeth whispered, reading his mind. She patted the ground beside her. ‘Here, come sit by me.’

They sat like that for hours. The sun slid across the sky. The afternoon shadows grew like dark vultures waiting for the dead of night. Jack was dozing quietly when he heard Elizabeth groan, then felt her shudder against him. His eyes flew open. ‘Lizzy! What is it?’

She groaned again, guttural and deep, wrought with pain. ‘Jack... it’s... it’s happening.’ She forced the words through gritted teeth as another wave rolled in.

She scrunched her face and cried out,

squeezing his hand impossibly hard. Her cheeks were flushed crimson, eyes flashing with the intensity of lightning, her hair lank and sweat-soaked at the roots. In the midst of her turmoil, Jack thought she looked raw and beautiful.

‘Get between my legs,’ she whimpered, heaving herself up on her elbows.

Jack scrambled around and lifted the dirty hem of her skirt.

‘Do you see anything?’

‘No...’

Elizabeth slumped back against the wheel.

Waves of pain rocked her body like a ship in the high seas, leaving her heaving as they passed. The waves crested higher, the troughs shorter and deeper, but still nothing happened.

Another hour passed. Panic gripped Jack’s heart, hanging heavy in his bowels. He wished Bill or Peg; even Ed, were here. They’d know what to do. He tried to calm himself by thinking about the gold and of Brisbane, but even that had no effect.

Looking down, he saw Elizabeth’s skin shone

with perspiration, while her exposed neck and bosom where she'd torn the collar of her dress was red and blotchy. She looked utterly defeated. 'Lizzy, should something have happened by now?' he asked. Her head lolled to the side. 'Did you hear me, my love?'

As if in response, Elizabeth started to moan, turning to a painful cry that made her body shudder and her fingers claw at the dirt. 'Get it out,' she croaked. 'Please Jack... just get it out.'



THE SUN LOWERED itself behind the distant ranges, the temperature dropping as early evening set in. Jack sat with his back against the wagon, Elizabeth's head on his shoulder. His whole body ached. He'd only moved once in the past hour, but it felt wrong to acknowledge it with Elizabeth like that beside him.

The waves now rolled and surged with less fe-



rocity but there was still no sign of the baby. Glancing down at Elizabeth, Jack was overcome with pity. She looked so small, her hand tiny as it rested limply in his. It made him wonder if pain made people shrink. He'd have to ask Bill next time he saw him. Elizabeth shivered fitfully, interrupting his thoughts, and he saw her arms had puckered with goosebumps. He adjusted her head carefully so it rested against the wagon, then stood to make a fire.

The dancing flames showed how her eyes had sunk, and her cheeks were like hot coals when Jack touched them. Yet still she shivered with a feverish chill. He grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders, then went to go and find more wood.

It was the perfect distraction, and he cast his search wider and wider until he found himself sitting by the river, staring at its dark surface with the camp a faint glow in the distance.

He threw a rock, watching the ripples spread outwards towards the bank, then turned his eyes to

Heaven. ‘Lord,’ he whispered. ‘Please, keep Lizzy—’

Elizabeth screamed.

Jack jumped to his feet and sprinted back towards the camp, skidding to his knees beside her. Her knees were up, legs open, gasping for breath.

‘I think it’s happen—’

Her whole body tensed, cutting off her next words, and she screamed again as she began to push. Her cheeks darkened to purple. The tendons of her neck rose up like thick strands of wire. Her eyes bulged from their sockets.

Jack couldn’t believe what he was seeing, and again wished he’d witnessed Peg giving birth. Then he’d know if this was normal.

Elizabeth sucked in deep, steeling herself for the next push. This one was even worse. Her body lifted off the oilskin like some sacred exorcism. Her hands left sweaty prints on the waxed cotton. On it went, and on some more, then, like the first, relented.

Jack thought that surely she’d had enough, but

like a prizefighter, battered and bruised, she came back for the next round, then the next one after that. It left him awestruck at what her body could endure. Then, finally, after what felt like an eternity, the baby began to crown.

‘I see it!’ he cried, scrambling forward. ‘Push, my love! It’s coming!’

Jack watched in fascinated horror as she stretched wider than he thought possible, her body expanding like melting wax as the beginnings of a little head appeared. ‘Yes! I can see its head!’ Jack exclaimed, hoping that that was what the clump of matted black hair, soaked in blood and fluid, was. ‘It’s coming, my love – keep pushing!’

Elizabeth wept as the pain washed over her, shaking her head to and fro like a drunk being evicted from a bar. Beads of sweat dotted her forehead and cheeks, catching the orange firelight.

‘You’re so close,’ Jack said, his voice shaking. ‘It’ll all be over soon. Come on, darling. Please.’

It roused the last of her reserves. Her eyes fluttered open and zeroed in on Jack, showing her gritty determination. She summoned her strength,

each muscle contracting until they were taut as a bowstring, then with a scream, pushed again, then again, and again.

The baby's body slid out with each effort as if it were a row boat across water. The shoulders appeared, then the small chest and arms. Jack cheered her on, coach to the fighter, guiding the slippery little body out while trying desperately not to crush it in his rattling hands. On the next push, Jack saw her tear, and she cried out, sharp and short, as the baby slipped into his hands.

Elizabeth slumped back, victorious.

In his panic Jack hadn't even looked at the child, and now saw its little manhood sitting proud beneath the pulsating umbilical cord. He recoiled in shock. A hot rush of tears flooded his eyes, a montage of a lifetime with the boy stampeding through his brain as he made sense of what he was looking at: teaching him to ride and hunt, to skip a rock, to cook meat so it was crispy on the outside and pink on the inside. He'd never been so surprised, and it reflected in the grin he gave Elizabeth as he held up the child.

‘It’s a boy!’ The words were choked with emotion. ‘It’s a bloody *boy*. You did it, my love. You did it.’ A tear escaped to roll down Jack’s cheek. His panic and fear evaporated, replaced by an overwhelming sense of joy.

Elizabeth gestured for him. Jack lay the child on her chest, where he whimpered and snuffled, his body shiny from mucous and blood. Standing back, Jack saw his limbs were long and straight, and his little nose was straight behind the pudginess. It made him feel proud, as if it was a personal achievement.

Elizabeth pulled down her torn top and guided his little mouth to her nipple. In her exhaustion she looked triumphant, like a Viking shield maiden returned from battle. Jack was awestruck. She was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

Elizabeth’s eyes slid closed as the moon rose orange above the plains. A contented smile lingered on her lips as the child nestled at her breast. Eventually, Jack got up and warmed some water beside the fire, then soaked a cloth in it and began gently wiping the child as he slept. Beneath the

blood and mucus he had fair skin like his mother, making Jack wonder what colour his eyes were. His existence had narrowed down to Elizabeth and his boy, and he felt like his heart was going to burst.

As Jack finished, Elizabeth opened her eyes and gestured for the cloth to clean herself up. It came away blood-soaked. She took another handful, bunched it up, and left it under her skirts.

Jack watched on anxiously. Even in the firelight she looked deathly pale. 'Is that normal?'

'It will stop soon.' She ruffled her skirts down and gave Jack a coy smile. 'A boy... How wrong you were.'

Jack grinned. 'What are we going to name him?'

'I've hardly thought about it, with you so convinced it would be a girl. Do you have any ideas?'

Jack thought for a moment. 'We could name him Robert, after Pa?'

'Robert Thomas,' Elizabeth repeated. 'I like that... it's strong.'

'Robert Thomas.' Jack said it slowly, tasting

the words as if they were a rare wine, then nodded decisively. 'A name fit for a king.'



JACK DREAMT he was stuck in a thick black fog. A cloud of darkness swirled around him, pulling at his body every time he tried to move. His legs felt like they were laden with lead, each step an immense effort as if he walked through glutinous mud. There were no shapes, no sky, no ground, just a suffocating mist that coated his throat and slid into his lungs if he tried to cry out. Occasionally, it would part, and he'd glimpse the silhouette of a figure. He'd push desperately towards it, but every time he reached out to touch it the fog would thicken and suffocate him.

Jack came to and sat bolt upright, panting. He rubbed his eyes, trying to shake the vision from his mind, then with a surge of panic leant down and checked on Elizabeth and Robert. They both slept deeply. 'Thank God...'

He watched them for a while longer, then closed his eyes and tried to fall back asleep, but the oily feeling of premonition lingered. He gave it another couple of minutes, then gave up and stood to put another log on the fire.

The moon was high overhead, a couple of nights from full, and there weren't yet hints of grey on the horizon. Probably just after midnight, Jack thought, and went to relieve himself just out of the firelight.

The mules shuffled and snorted as they smelt him, and he hushed them with soothing words as he passed. The air had a chill, and he breathed deeply, savouring the feel in his lungs as his stream tinkled onto the grass.

He was fully awake now. He knew he should get some sleep, but there was no way it was happening naturally. On his way back, he fetched the whiskey from his rucksack and brought it to the fire, filling a mug to the brim.

'That ought to do it,' he muttered, then pinched his nose and took the lot in short gulps, gasping as it torched the back of his throat. 'Maybe



one more.' He refilled it half again and threw that back too.

His chest burned and his eyes watered, yet they began to droop almost immediately. He shuffled back over and lay down beside Elizabeth before they slid closed.

There were no dreams this time.

## CHAPTER FOUR

JACK WOKE AS A BIRD SCREECHED overhead and settled in the tree above him. It cheeped and chirped happily, like a knife stabbing into his eardrums.

He went to sit up and find something to throw at it, but an explosion in his skull halted his progress, and he slumped back and closed his eyes, cursing himself for such strong-handed pours.

The sun glowed through his eyelids and burned his skin. His mouth was dry, his tongue thick and furry, and there was a rank aftertaste in his mouth. ‘Lizzy... What time is it?’ he croaked. ‘It’s so damn hot.’

Elizabeth didn't answer.

There were an ungodly amount of flies buzzing around. With his eyes still closed, Jack wondered why. Concentrating on the sound, he noticed the absence of all others. The kookaburras were silent, as were the crickets; but for the soft wind and the occasional chirp from the bird in the tree, it was silent.

He opened his eyes, blinked a few times, then rubbed his eyes. Beside him, Elizabeth's legs turned from shapeless blobs to a crisp picture. 'Lizzy, you awake?'

Fighting the ache in his head, Jack pushed himself up so his back rested against the wagon, then reached over to nudge her leg. As if by dark magic, the oilskin lifted off the ground in a furious storm of buzzing that made Jack's blood run cold. He leant closer, then recoiled. The dark oilskin had hidden rivulets of blood caked around Elizabeth's legs, baked hard in the heat of the morning. The bottom of her skirt was stained copper, the dust under her feet, black. The flies had been feasting

with relish until his movement had disturbed them.

‘Lizzy...’ he whispered, full of dread. ‘Can you hear me?’

Jack couldn’t look at her face. He knew what he’d find. He closed his eyes and searched for the sound of her breathing, or anything from Robert, then pinched the inside of his thigh and prayed it was a dream. It just hurt.

He forced himself to turn, then sucked in a sharp breath. There was Elizabeth, the same, but slightly different: greyer, duller, void of life’s colours. Her face was drawn, skin tight; thankfully, her eyes were closed.

‘Lizzy...’ Jack nudged her shoulder, willing her to open her eyes and smile. It was firm and rubbery. He shook it. Her whole body moved. ‘Lizzy... wake up!’

Immediately, Jack thought of Robert, that the movement may disturb him, and he reached out and patted the child’s sleeping form under the blanket. There was a stiffness there too. ‘No...

please, God...' A rush of nausea filled Jack's throat, and he vomited into the dirt.

Jack sat back against the wagon in a daze, his beard flecked with bile and stringy mucus. A great emptiness settled over him like a hooded cloak, spreading and overtaking his senses so that they withdrew and switched themselves off. Sound faded to a single tone. His staring eyes saw nothing. His muscles stopped responding. His arms fell by his side. He barely felt the ants sink their pincers into his flesh. His head slumped against his chest. His breathing became ragged. What little saliva he had left trickled out of his mouth for the flies to steal.

Minutes passed, or it could have been hours, until a movement in the corner of his eye finally broke his trance. With great effort, he lifted his head, to see a crow perched on Elizabeth's chest.

Jack came fully awake in horror. It was plucking at the blanket, trying to get at Robert. 'Get away!' He lashed out at it, but the crow flapped lazily out of the way and landed near Eliza-

beth's feet, where it tilted its head and watched him through its devilish black eye.

Jack scrambled to his feet, grabbing one of the stones from around the fire as he did, then with an incoherent scream, cocked his arm back and threw it.

It was an easy throw: the rock was big, the crow only five yards away. It hit with a sickening thump, tumbling it into the dust; maiming, but not killing.

Jack felt no guilt; on the contrary, he was overcome with a burning desire to finish it. He grabbed another rock and went after it. 'You bastard... You damned bastard...' The crow flapped its damaged wings, squawking helplessly, but it could barely move. 'You damned evil wicked bastard...'

Jack dropped to his knees beside the crow. Its oily feathers were peppered with dust and blood. It squawked again pitifully, as if it was aware of its fate. Jack lifted the rock over his head, revelling in this unknown feeling of raw hatred. All of his rage, sorrow, and despair went into the downward stroke.

The crow stood no chance, dead after the first swing; still, Jack lifted the rock again and again until all that was left was a mush of dirt and bloodied feathers.

Then, breathing hard, he threw it aside, and wept.



JACK DUG a grave down by the river, high enough that if it flooded it wouldn't wash away, but close enough that it had a nice outlook. There were no more tears, just a numbness that made him work with clinical efficiency.

When it was done, he pulled the canvas off the back of the wagon and cut it into two, laying the pieces out on the ground. He lifted Robert's body off Elizabeth's chest. It was so frail and vulnerable. Jack couldn't believe it had ever been a living thing; couldn't believe that for a brief couple of hours, he'd been its father, and it had been his son.

After placing Robert in the smaller of the two

pieces of canvas and tying it off, Jack stooped under Elizabeth and lifted her on to the other piece. Her body felt stiff and wooden, and he avoided looking at her face. He didn't want to remember her like this. She'd been so alive, so full of excitement and vitality; now she was empty and vacant, like a house with no furniture.

He tied off the canvas, then lifted her and staggered down to the riverbank. The dying light threw deep shadows over the grave. The breeze drew ripples on the water. He lowered her down gently until she lay against the bottom, then went back to fetch the smaller bundle, which he arranged delicately atop Elizabeth's chest so she could forever be feeding their son.

His muscles burned and his breathing heaved as he shovelled the dirt back in. He had to look away as the dirt covered Elizabeth's head, but forced himself to keep going until the hole was full. After smoothing it off, he made a crucifix out of river rocks on top.

As the last rock clinked into place, the reality of what had happened hit Jack with a force like an



earthquake. He collapsed into a heap beside the grave and began to sob. 'Please, Lizzy... don't leave me...' His fingers raked feebly at the dirt. 'Don't leave me...please...'

But there was no one left to answer.

# CAN'T STOP NOW, CAN YOU?

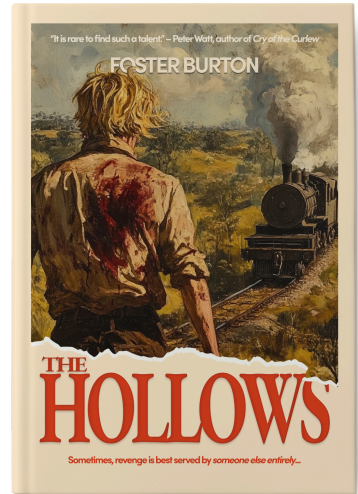
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