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About 46,000 words

BOLDREWOOD

Bad Company

by

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Inspired by Rolf Boldrewood

Chapter 1

In Bad Company

At first light the country around Chidowla seemed to have been made only that minute, as if dawn itself had built it from mist and silence and the long patience of trees.

The old apple-gums stood pale and ghostly along the creek before the sun touched them. Then the first wash of gold came

through the branches, and the water caught it and threw it back in broken copper. Birds began one by one—small calls at first, then the full morning chorus—and the flat below the house emerged from the whitening fog: the fence lines, the little patch of turned earth, the dairy shed, the chicken run, the rough track heading away into timber and distance.

Three hundred and twenty acres of Crown land, selected, paid on, fenced, milked, planted, and defended against failure by the labour of two people and the refusal of either to admit defeat.

Bill Hardwick stood at the fence line in the cold half-light, driving in a new post with a long-handled rammer. He had been up since before five. He worked in an old flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled and a pair of faded work shorts, his boots dark with dew and red dust. The muscles in his arms and shoulders moved cleanly under the skin with each strike. He set the post, checked the alignment against the run of wire, then drove it again until it took hold in the earth with the proper note.

He stepped back, breathing hard but satisfied. The new fencing wire, delivered two weeks earlier after a long argument about freight costs and supply delays, ran straight as a drawn line toward the creek. On the far side of the paddock, beyond the little rise, the Donahue boundary sagged and wandered in a way that offended him every time he looked at it.

From the dairy shed came the steady metallic hiss of milk hitting the bucket.

Jenny was already at work.

Bill rested his hands on the top wire and looked across his place. He never entirely lost the shock of it—that this was his land. Not much by the measure of the big runs, but his. A slab cottage with four rooms and a corrugated roof. Water in the creek most seasons. A sound dairy cow. Chickens. A kitchen garden. Firewood stacked under the lean-to. Enough to start from, if a man was sober, industrious, and had a wife who could stretch a pound further than any banker or politician would believe possible.

A kookaburra burst into laughter from a dead limb above him. Bill glanced up and grinned in spite of himself.

“Laugh away,” he said softly. “You’re not the one paying off a mortgage.”

The bird launched from the branch and vanished over the creek.

Inside the dairy, Jenny Hardwick sat on a low milking stool with the pail between her knees, her head turned slightly toward the open doorway as she listened for sounds from the house. She was not a woman anyone would have called delicate. Her face was strong-boned and direct, her eyes sharp and clear, her mouth made for quick judgement and quicker speech. She wore old jeans, gumboots, and one of Bill’s shirts over a singlet, and there was a white streak of milk across one cheek where she had pushed back a loose strand of hair with the back of her hand.

She worked with that same practical certainty she brought to everything. Her father had taught her cows before she was tall enough to see over their backs, and the work had stayed in her

body. Strip, pull, release. Strip, pull, release. The cow's flank was warm against her shoulder. The bucket foamed. Outside, the hens scratched under the fence and muttered to one another.

A small figure appeared in the doorway.

Billy, four years old, barefoot and solemn, stood with one hand on the jamb.

"Can I pat her?" he asked.

Jenny looked up. Her face changed at once.

"You can, but gentle. She's a working girl, same as me."

Billy came forward with exaggerated care and laid his palm on the cow's side. The animal shifted its weight and stamped once. Jenny adjusted without breaking rhythm.

"That's it," she said. "Nicely now. She gives us milk, we treat her decent. That's the bargain."

From inside the cottage came the thin, outraged cry of Mary, not yet a year old and already determined to make every grievance known to the world.

Jenny sighed without impatience.

"Go and tell your sister I'm coming," she said. "Tell her Mummy heard."

Billy nodded and ran for the house with all the gravity of a messenger entrusted with affairs of state.

Jenny finished the cow, set the bucket aside, and sat back on her heels for a second. The cry from the house had settled into a fretful mutter. Through the dairy door she could see Bill moving along the fence line, large and deliberate in the growing

light, checking each staple and strainer as if the whole property depended on every one of them.

In a way, it did.

She rose, carried the milk inside, and moved straight into the machinery of morning.

By eight, breakfast was done and the table cleared. The kitchen still smelled of fresh bread, wood smoke, fried eggs, and tea so strong it could have stood up in the pot by itself. Sunlight lay in rectangles across the floorboards. Bill sat outside on an upturned log beneath the eaves, oiling and checking the handpiece he preferred for blade shearing work. His swag was rolled and ready. Beside the gate stood the old tray-back ute he would take as far as the river country, packed with gear, fuel, and enough food to keep him from having to rely too much on anyone else's charity. In the bed, strapped carefully under a tarp, lay a set of hand shears, tools, bedding, spare boots, and a cooler Jenny had packed before dawn.

Jenny came to the door with Mary on her hip and watched him in silence for a moment. Billy sat in the dirt by the step making roads with a stick and parking stones in clusters to represent towns, stations, or perhaps entire nations.

Bill looked up.

"I've split enough wood for near a month," he said. "There's diesel for the pump, and I topped up the water tank yesterday. If anything goes wrong with the ute, Simon Muller said he'd come look at it. And Calthorpe knows you can draw on the farm account if you need to."

“There won’t be need.”

“I know there won’t. I’m just telling you.”

He set the handpiece down and wiped it with oiled cloth before placing it in its case.

“How long?” Jenny asked.

“Three months. Maybe four if the season holds and there’s sheds wanting men after Tandara.”

“Four months,” she repeated, as if testing the sound of it and finding it wanting.

“Could be sixty thousand this year,” he said. “Maybe more if the tallies are good and they’re paying what they say. Enough for a deposit on Donahue’s place if Dick finally gives way. Calthorpe all but said so.”

Jenny shifted Mary to the other hip and looked over the paddock toward the line of trees marking the Donahue boundary. Even from here she could see the poverty of it—the undermaintained fences, the neglected gateway, the roof that wanted work.

“Bridget was here yesterday,” she said. “Brought three of the children. I sent her home with flour and bacon and formula for the baby. Dick had gone off to town again. She says he’ll sell if someone puts cash in front of him before he drinks his nerve away.”

Bill made a sound that might have been agreement.

“Poor woman,” Jenny said, though there was no softness in the way she looked across that boundary. “But his foolishness is our opportunity.”

It was always like that with her. Compassion first, calculation just behind it, and no shame in either.

“You buy that place,” she went on, her eyes brightening, “and we’ve got a ring fence round both blocks. Then we lease the extra grazing if the department opens it up. Then we build the flock slowly, proper. Sheep first, more cattle later. Fix the back paddock. Put in another water line. Maybe solar on the machinery shed. Maybe—”

“A helicopter pad?” Bill said.

She gave him a look.

“Don’t be an idiot. I’m serious.”

“I know you are.”

“The Mullers started in a bark hut,” she said. “Now look at them. Brick house. Verandah. Orchard. Dairy. Side business with the cheese. Karin drives into town in that big white four-wheel-drive like she owns the district.”

“She thinks she does.”

Jenny ignored that.

“There’s no reason we can’t do the same,” she said. “No reason at all. One man and woman can do what another has done, if they work and keep off the grog and use their brains.”

Then, with a sudden crack in the severity, she said, “And I’d like a proper vehicle for myself, Bill. Not that old thing that stalls at the school gate and rattles like cutlery in a bucket. Something with air-conditioning. Is that a crime?”

Bill laughed then, the deep warm laugh she liked best.

“A crime? No.”

“Well, I’d settle for a second-hand Prado if the Lord feels generous and Dick Donahue feels desperate.”

Mary, picking up the rise and fall of their voices without understanding a word, flapped both arms and squealed. Billy looked up from his stick-road and announced, “I’m getting a motorbike.”

“You’re getting an education,” Jenny said.

Bill rose and crossed to them. He kissed Mary’s soft head, then Jenny’s cheek. For an instant the brisk command left her face.

“When you get paid,” she said, dropping her voice, “you put the money straight in the bank. Not into your pocket to vanish one ten-dollar note at a time in pubs and servo stops and somebody else’s bad idea.”

“Have I ever?”

“No,” she said. “And you won’t start now.”

He touched the back of one finger to Mary’s hand. The baby caught it with fierce determination.

“I’ll be home before Christmas,” he said.

“You’d better.”

Billy abandoned his engineering and came to clutch his father’s leg.

“Where you going?”

“Down the river. To shear.”

“What’ll you bring me back?”

Bill glanced at Jenny.

“A horse,” he said.

Billy’s eyes widened.

Jenny said, “He’ll bring you back a toy horse, if you’re lucky.”

Bill stooped, picked the boy up, and held him a little longer than usual. The smell of sunlight, soap, and dust came off the child’s warm neck. When he put him down again, he found Jenny watching him with that grave expression she wore when her feelings ran too deep to be trusted near speech.

“You write,” she said. “Not just a text when you get reception and then nothing for ten days. Properly.”

“I’ll write.”

“Every week.”

“Every week.”

“And come home safe, William Hardwick.”

“When do I do anything else?”

She almost smiled. Almost.

The sound of an approaching engine came thinly through the trees.

Bill turned toward the track. A vehicle appeared in a drift of dust between the trunks and came rattling into the yard: an old dual-cab ute with one door in primer and a cracked windscreen taped at the corner. It stopped badly, coughing twice before the engine cut out. The driver’s door opened and Janus Stoate got down.

Stoate was the kind of man who seemed put together out of wire and impatience. Thin, dark, quick in all his motions, with eyes that never rested and clothes that managed to suggest both

carelessness and performance. He was about forty, perhaps more, perhaps less. Hard living took the chronology out of some men.

"Bill Hardwick," he called cheerfully. "By God, I hoped I'd catch you before you left."

Bill stepped forward and shook hands. Stoate's grip was dry and quick.

"What brings you up to Chidowla?"

"Same road as you, I expect. Headed down to the river. Thought if I timed it right I might pick up company. Better than driving half the country alone with the engine light on and no phone signal."

"That you have done," Bill said. "Stay the night. We'll leave early."

Jenny had come to the doorway with Mary again. She did not speak at once. Her eyes went over Stoate in one clean assessing sweep and came away disapproving.

Stoate took off his cap with a flourish that might have suited a better man.

"Mrs. Hardwick. Looking well."

"There's tea on the stove," she said. "And cold mutton in the fridge if you're hungry."

"You're an angel."

"I'm nothing of the sort. Wash your hands before you touch anything."

He laughed as if this were wit instead of warning and followed Bill inside.

That evening, with the children fed and put down and the kitchen lamp making a warm yellow pool over the table, Stoate talked politics between mouthfuls of mutton and bread. He spoke of labour, of solidarity, of corporate landholding and exploitation, of what the unions would soon make possible if only working men stood firm together. His language had shifted with the times—corporates instead of squatters, supply chains instead of wool brokers, industrial relations law instead of the old pastoral order—but the music of it was the same: grievance turned into grand theory by a man who liked the sound of his own righteousness.

Bill listened, eating steadily.

Jenny moved around the kitchen clearing plates and setting down tea with a precision more eloquent than speech.

At last Stoate said, with a smile that carried offence in it, “Women don’t always see the bigger picture, do they?”

Jenny turned.

“No offence taken,” she said. “And none given when I say the bigger picture you’re painting looks like clever nonsense sold to honest men that should know better.”

Stoate chuckled and looked to Bill for support. He found none.

A little later Jenny drew Bill into the bedroom and half-closed the door behind them. Mary slept in the cot by the window. Billy, in striped pyjamas, lay propped on one elbow on the bed watching his parents with worried attention.

"I don't like him," Jenny said at once, low and hard. "Not a little bit. I don't care what cause he says he serves."

Bill rubbed a hand over the back of his neck.

"You don't like unions."

"I don't like men who make their living off other men's tempers." She stepped closer. "Listen to me, Bill. You do your work. You get paid. You come home. That is our politics."

He tried to answer reasonably. He spoke of wage pressure, of contractors cutting rates, of men needing to stand together or be picked off one by one. Jenny met every argument with the same unsparing common sense that had built their life with him. Prices were down. Wool was down. The whole country had taken hits. You could not demand big wages from small profits forever and expect nature or arithmetic to care. If a man had children and a wife and a farm half paid for, his first duty was not to men like Janus Stoate making speeches in camp kitchens.

"You look at those children," she said, pointing toward the bed and the cot. "That is where your money goes. That is where your loyalty goes. Not to some gas-bag with a grievance and a travel mug."

Bill, tired and stubborn, said the wrong thing then—that every man ought to stand by his order.

Jenny's face altered.

"Order? I call it disorder. And the people who stir it up never seem to be the ones paying for it after."

He should have stopped there. Instead he pushed back, feeling his own dignity at stake now, and the quarrel deepened

because both of them were honest and both, in different ways, were afraid.

When they came out again Stoate was standing by the sink with his empty plate, the picture of tactful ignorance. Bill told him they would sleep in the lean-to and leave before dawn.

At the cottage door he paused, waiting, perhaps, for Jenny to come after him and soften the thing. She did not. A second later the bedroom door shut with a crack like a shot.

He slept badly.

They left in the grey before sunrise. Bill's chest felt tight with all the words unmade between them. The cottage shrank in the rear-view mirror as the ute rolled down through the apple-gums. A line of smoke rose from the chimney. Jenny was nowhere in sight.

Stoate, beside him, waited the better part of an hour before saying lightly, "That's the trouble with marriage. A man can't hold an opinion without half a parliament at home."

Bill kept his eyes on the road.

"My old woman sees further ahead than most."

Stoate took the rebuff and went on talking. He had a theory for everything and a scheme behind every theory. He spoke of capital and labour and councils and rights and the share every worker ought to have in the wealth of the country. He spoke of equal division, elected committees, co-operative ownership, the redistribution of giant holdings into smaller productive units managed for the common good. The words poured out of him in a stream.

Bill let him run until the theories began colliding with plain facts.

“And who bosses this wonderland?” he asked at last.

“No one bosses. The council administers.”

“Which is bossing by another name.”

Stoate frowned. Bill kept going. Men were not equal in effort, judgement, courage, or honesty. Some would dodge the hard work and hunt out the easy jobs. Some would use office to revenge themselves on better men. Committees could be as petty as overseers and less accountable. Any fool could promise fairness in the abstract. The trouble came when one had to assign unpleasant tasks on a Thursday afternoon in a dry year.

By then Stoate’s tone had sharpened. He accused Bill of sounding like management. Bill said that if the union men thought station-running was such an easy road to riches, they ought to pool their own money, lease some country, shear their own sheep, sell their own wool, grow their own feed, and divide the profits as they pleased.

Stoate had no good answer to that.

Late that afternoon they reached North Yalla-doora and camped near the creek. Stoate, looking over the station buildings and the spread of grass on the flat, suggested they might as well ask the overseer for rations. Bill turned on him with such disgust that Stoate laughed and called it a joke, though plainly it had not been one.

Bill got the billy on, unpacked Jenny’s bread and beef, and said what he thought of men who abused property owners by day and

begged from them by evening. Stoate answered with a sly remark about sheds and grass burning in dry weather.

Bill looked at him then in a new way.

That night in the men’s hut at Yalla-doora, Stoate got exactly the reception he deserved. Joe Brace mocked him to his face. Paddy O’Kelly nearly threw him bodily from the place after Stoate called him a scab. Bill, who had no wish to be counted among quarrellers yet disliked cowardice more, left with Stoate for the camp rather than stay behind his back.

It was the last courtesy he meant to extend him.

A fortnight later they came into the country around Tandara.

The mountains were gone by then, the timber thinned, the air widened. The world opened into the Riverina plain, broad and spring-green under a sky so large it seemed to flatten thought. The camp at Steamer Point spread along the river in tents, trucks, swags, tarps, utes, horse-floats, portable generators, and men moving among all of it with the practiced disorder of a seasonal workforce. Bill made camp, shook hands with shearers he knew from past years, and learned within an hour that trouble was already brewing.

The union had sent instructions. If the owner would not sign the agreement in full, the shed was to be called out.

Bill stood by the fire with tea in his hand and said what he thought. Hunter of Tandara had always paid decent rates, fed men properly, and settled on time. No one could say otherwise. If the union tried to tell him he was not master in his own shed, he would tell them where to go and likely improve on the wording.

Nearby, Stoate had already found his audience: younger men, single blokes, those with little debt and less caution, the sort who loved a fight best before they had measured the cost.

The next day Bill saw Stoate up at the ration point, tucker bag in hand, taking free meat and flour under the eye of Jack Macdonald, Tandara’s overseer. Macdonald, a big hard Scot-Australian with a face burned dark by decades outdoors, gave him the food with open contempt and told him exactly what kind of man begged from the employers he was trying to ruin.

Stoate went away with murder in his expression.

By then the lines were plain enough to Bill. Men like Macdonald might be harsh, but they stood where you could see them. Stoate stood nowhere honestly at all.

The shearing began. The great shed came alive with labour and noise and heat. In the modern world there were electric handpieces, digital tallies, payroll software, compliance posters on the wall, phones charging by the smoko station, and at least one rouseabout livestreaming foolish snippets to friends in town whenever the signal held. But the real work had changed less than city people imagined. Sheep still kicked. Wool still came off under steel. A man still earned his cheque in sweat and cuts and backache and speed.

Bill was good at the work. Better than good. Once he found rhythm, everything outside the stand vanished: the sheep between his knees, the long run of the comb, the fall of fleece, the count rising. At the far end of the board, Jim Stanford—huge,

calm, and plainly the best shearer in the shed—worked at an even more fearsome pace.

And over it all moved Janus Stoate with the authority of an elected delegate and the soul of a petty tyrant.

On the second day he halted the whole shed on the claim that the wool was damp.

It was not damp.

Bill knew it. Stanford knew it. Macdonald knew it. Half the older men on the board knew it from touch alone. But because Stoate invoked the agreement and the penalties attached to defiance, the shearers stopped. Two days' wages vanished into the air.

Bill thought of Jenny when he lay in his bunk that night.

You look at those children, William Hardwick.

He wrote to her before the next mail run, apologising for the quarrel, telling her she had been right about Stoate, telling her too that the shed was running well and that if luck held he would come home with enough to secure the Donahue place and begin the ring fence she had planned down to the last post and gate.

For a few days after that things improved. The work resumed. Tallies rose fast. Men grew hopeful again. Big numbers on the board meant real money, and real money meant home, debt cleared, projects begun, machinery repaired, Christmas made easier, a little breathing room bought from the future.

Then on a Friday afternoon, with the shed in full cry and the season turning in their favour, a a message reached Stoate's phone.

He read it. Folded it. Climbed onto the wool table.

Something in the silence that followed stopped every hand in the shed.

“Men of the union,” he shouted. “Drop the shears. Strike’s ordered. Every shed in the district. Effective now.”

The words struck the room like a physical blow.

Macdonald went white with fury. Stanford straightened from his stand. Around Bill, men cursed, protested, stared, or stood motionless in disbelief. They were three-quarters through. Another week, perhaps less, and they would have their money. Some already had plans for every dollar of it.

Stoate read out the message in a triumphant voice, relishing every command and every threat of disciplinary action against any man who continued.

For a moment no one moved. Then the arguments broke loose in every direction at once.

Macdonald told Stoate, very quietly, that if the law allowed decent treatment for vermin he would have him nailed to a barn door. Stoate sneered and turned back to the men. He wanted obedience, fear, spectacle. He wanted the righteousness of destruction at another man’s expense.

Stanford answered first. This was a union shed already, he said. The rules were posted. The owner had complied. Why should men throw away their wages to injure an employer who had dealt fairly by them?

Then Bill stepped forward.

He did not think much before doing it. Some parts of a man are settled long before the moment comes to test them.

He looked around the shed at the faces of the older shearers, the married men, the ones with mortgages, rent, children, machinery payments, ex-wives, medical bills, school fees, and all the thousand ordinary forms of obligation that made heroic gestures dearer than speeches admitted.

“I second Stanford,” he said. “We send a man to Wagga, confirm what’s to be done, and till then we don’t rush blind into ruin. I want to take my money home to my wife and the kids. I’ve got a use for it. I daresay most of you have too.”

Hands began to rise.

More than a few. Many. Then most.

The shed erupted. Men shouted over one another, divided now not by old slogans but by immediate self-interest and conscience. Younger hotheads clustered near Stoate. Older men moved toward Stanford and Bill. Macdonald stood at the head of the board with his arms folded, unreadable, waiting to see whether Tandara would finish the season in order or collapse into madness.

Bill lifted his eyes once and found Stoate staring back at him from the wool table, small and venomous and lit from above by the dusty shaft of afternoon sun.

Behind Stoate, behind the shed, behind the whole fevered argument, Bill saw as clearly as if she stood there in the doorway of Chidowla: Jenny with Mary on her hip and Billy at her skirt, looking at him with those fierce, certain eyes.

Everything he wanted was on one side of the balance.

Everything Janus Stoate wanted was on the other.

And the shears, for the first time since the season began, were silent.

Chapter 2

The Shed at Tandara

By the time the first votes were counted in the Tandara shed, the afternoon light had turned thick and yellow with dust, and every man in the place seemed to be breathing somebody else's temper.

Bill Hardwick stood a little apart from the wool table, his shirt open at the throat, the sweat drying cold along his back.

The electric handpiece hung motionless from its overhead cable. All down the board the other stands were still. Sheep shifted uneasily in the catching pens. Somewhere outside, in the yards, a dog barked once and was answered by another farther off. The ordinary sounds of station work carried on as if nothing had happened, but in the shed itself the silence had a dangerous, listening quality.

Stoate remained on the wool table, small and wiry and lifted up by his own importance. In one hand he held the folded message ordering the men out. His narrow face, all bone and nervous conviction, seemed sharpened by the slant light behind him. He had expected obedience. Bill could see that now. Not debate. Not a counting of hands. Obedience.

Jim Stanford, broad as a gate and twice as solid, stood with both fists on his hips near the far stand. He had said his piece plainly enough: Tandara was already a union shed; Hunter had signed what ought reasonably to be signed; no man with a wife, children, or debts should be ordered to throw away good wages merely because somebody up-country wanted to make a district-wide demonstration of power. Bill had backed him, and the married men had begun to gather accordingly.

Then the younger fellows, those with no dependents and high blood, moved toward Stoate. Voices rose. Some cursed the owners on principle. Some cursed the union for foolish timing. Others looked only confused, as if they had turned up to shear sheep and unexpectedly found themselves in a Parliament they had never wanted to enter.

Jack Macdonald said, in the sort of voice that carried farther than shouting, “Any man that stops this shed without reason can answer to Mr. Hunter himself.”

Stoate swung toward him at once. “We answer to the union.”

“You answer to the tally board and the agreement signed on that wall,” Stanford said.

Stoate stabbed the folded message at him. “This is the agreement now.”

“No,” Bill said. “This is an order. That’s not the same thing.”

A few men muttered assent. Stoate heard it and turned his attention fully on Bill, who had become, without asking for it, the second center of resistance in the room.

“Hardwick,” Stoate said, smiling in that dry, offensive way of his. “I had you for a better union man than this.”

“I am a better union man than this,” Bill said. “Better than sending blokes home broke for the pleasure of seeing who jumps first.”

That drew a rough laugh from somewhere near the pens, though the laughter died quickly. The air was too charged for comfort. Bill saw two of the younger shearers, fellows he knew by sight but not deeply, glance at one another and edge nearer Stoate. One of them had a red bandanna tied round his throat. The other looked no older than twenty-one and had the reckless eyes of a man who has not yet learned how long disgrace can last.

Stoate raised his voice. “We have instructions from the branch. Every shed in the district is to stop. If Tandara works

on, Tandara breaks ranks. And any man who breaks ranks can answer before committee."

Before committee. Bill heard the phrase move through the room like a cold draught.

He thought suddenly of Jenny at Chidowla, standing in the kitchen doorway with Mary on her hip and Billy pressed against her skirts, saying with flat certainty that Janus Stoate made his living out of other men's tempers. At the time Bill had bristled because pride is a foolish thing and marriage leaves no room for it in the wrong places. Now he felt only the heavy recognition that she had seen the man whole before he himself had done so.

Macdonald stepped forward. "This is Hunter's station. The sheep are in. The men are here. The rates are fair. The tucker's sound. The season's near done. If you stop now you do it out of pure devilment."

"Better devilment than servility," Stoate snapped.

Jim Stanford made a disgusted sound. "There's always a big word with you, Stoate, when another man's money is to be lost."

The arguments began all over again from ten directions at once. Men who had never in their lives delivered more than two connected thoughts on industrial principle suddenly found themselves inventing theories in self-defence. Others simply asked, more honestly, what they were supposed to live on if they walked off. A rouseabout cried out that he had a ute payment due Monday. One of the pen-boys said his mother needed surgery in Wagga and he had counted this run's wages already. A shearer from Hay, rawboned and angry, shouted that if they all stood firm the

owners would have to yield inside the week. Somebody else answered that the sheep would not wait for ideology.

Above them the corrugated roof snapped and ticked in the heat.

At last Stanford said, “Enough. We vote proper.”

Stoate opened his mouth to resist, but he could feel the room turning. He had overplayed the righteousness and undercounted the cost. With bad grace, and only because refusing then would have exposed him, he allowed it.

They voted by show of hands.

Men who intended to stay in the shed stood to the left of Stanford and Bill. Men willing to obey the strike stood to the right with Stoate. Others lingered uncertainly in the middle until Macdonald barked at them that indecision was not a recognized category in any shed he had ever run.

When the count was done, Bill felt his lungs loosen.

The majority favored staying—if, and only if, they could send a man to Wagga Wagga to verify the order, learn whether exceptions were being made for already-union sheds, and return by the next day’s dinner break. Until then no one would shear. But no one would leave.

It was not the clean victory Stoate had wanted, nor the clean continuation Macdonald had wanted, but it gave the married men time and the cooler heads a chance to think.

Stoate descended from the wool table with the dangerous self-command of a man storing injury for later use.

"You're making a mistake," he said to Stanford and Bill both. "Committee won't like this."

Stanford said, "Committee can shear the sheep, then."

That got laughter again, rougher this time. Stoate took it badly.

Bill spent the rest of the afternoon helping settle the camp, though no work resumed. Men hung about in knots, smoking and arguing, each group more certain than the next that it alone understood the district's future. The younger union enthusiasts tried to keep up a tone of militant excitement, but the mood had altered now that the day's earnings were visibly gone. Lost wages have a way of clarifying politics. By dusk several men who had shouted loudest for solidarity were making private enquiries of Macdonald about whether a delayed resumption would forfeit the balance of their tallies.

Macdonald gave little away. He was a hard man, but Bill respected him because hardness in him seemed born of responsibility rather than vanity. He had stores to account for, teams to manage, fleeces to move, and an owner to answer to. One could disagree with such a man and still know where he stood.

Near sunset Mr. Hunter himself rode in from the far paddocks with a stockman behind him. He was younger than many owners, broad-shouldered and sun-dark, with the look of someone more at ease on horseback than in any office. He listened while Macdonald laid out the matter in blunt Scots-Australian brevity, then dismounted and came straight into the shed.

The men quieted at once.

Hunter removed his hat and hooked it against his thigh. "Gentlemen," he said, "I'm told there is some uncertainty as to whether Tandara is to be shut down under this district order."

Stoate began, "There's no uncertainty at all—"

Hunter held up one hand without looking at him. "I was speaking."

The room stayed very still.

"My position is simple," Hunter said. "This station signed the union terms agreed at the start of the run. The rates are paid. The rations are as promised. The board is in order. If any man has a grievance with Tandara, let him state it now and we'll hear it fairly."

None came. Even Stoate did not claim the board was damp now.

Hunter nodded once. "Very good. Then if this dispute is elsewhere, I submit it ought not be made my sheep's affair, nor your families' affair, without at least a proper explanation." His gaze moved across the men, not theatrical, not pleading. "I can't compel anyone to shear. A station owner who thinks he can compel anything for long is a fool. But I will say this: any man who stays will be treated squarely. Any man who leaves will be paid out to date without quibble. And should a delegate or committee later attempt to punish a shearer for acting reasonably in a shed already under agreement, they'll have to answer for the absurdity of it before more than one audience."

It was as close to a speech as Bill had ever heard from him, and all the more effective because one felt Hunter disliked speeches almost as much as Macdonald did.

Stoate said coldly, “You talk of fairness from the comfortable side of the ledger.”

Hunter looked at him then, and for the first time his temper showed.

“I talk as a man who has spent the last six months trying to keep this place solvent through freight increases, a dry autumn, machinery repairs, three absconding contractors, and a bank manager who wouldn’t know a wether from a wheelbarrow. If comfort is what you call that, you and I were raised to different dictionaries.”

A few men grinned. Stoate did not.

The owner stayed another quarter-hour, answering practical questions and asking one or two of his own. When he had done, he told Macdonald to send to Wagga at first light and left the shed as directly as he had entered it.

Night came hot and windless. Over in the men’s quarters the argument continued through supper and beyond it. Bill ate little. The lost half-day sat in him like a stone, not because he begrudged every dispute in principle but because he could see the month’s arithmetic disarranging itself. He had counted on this run for more than ordinary wages. Chidowla stood at a point where another good season and a wise purchase might change its future altogether. A bad season, or a run of foolish interruptions, could leave them where they were for years.

He wrote to Jenny after dark by the light of a rechargeable lantern, his elbows on the rough table, the paper curling at the edges in the heat.

My dear girl,

You were right about Stoate. He has made himself trouble here exactly as you said he would. There was an order down to stop every shed, ours included, though this station is already under union agreement and no man can say the owner has dealt badly with us. Stanford and I stood against a blind walkout and the men voted to hold until the matter can be checked in Wagga tomorrow. We have lost half a day already and maybe more, which turns my stomach when I think of you and the children and the plans we made for Donahue's place. Still I would rather lose a little by standing up at the right moment than lose all by being dragged after a fool.

Tell Billy I have not forgotten the horse, though it may come to him with painted eyes and not much appetite. Kiss Mary for me and keep enough for yourself. I know what that house asks of you.

Your loving husband,

Bill

He folded the sheet, addressed it, and sat a moment longer without moving. Around him the camp noises rose and fell: boots on boards, a laugh, the clink of enamel mugs, somebody coughing beyond the wall. The station generators hummed in the distance like insects. He thought of the kitchen at home, the smell of tea and wood smoke, the little square of lamplight on the floorboards, Jenny counting figures in her head while Billy made roads in the dirt and Mary demanded to be noticed before every

other creature on earth. The homesickness struck him so sharply that he almost swore aloud.

Outside, near the cookhouse, he found Stanford smoking alone.

“What do you make of tomorrow?” Bill asked.

Stanford shrugged one massive shoulder. “Either Wagga says the order stands and we choose whether to spit in the union’s eye, or Wagga says Tandara’s excepted and Stoate has to swallow his own medicine. Either way he won’t forgive being crossed.”

“No.”

Stanford looked at him sideways. “You married?”

“Yes.”

“Children?”

“Two.”

Stanford flicked ash into the dust. “Then you did right. The unmarried can afford principles in bulk. A man with mouths at home buys them by the ounce.”

Bill laughed despite himself. “My wife would say much the same.”

“Smart woman, by the sound.”

“She is.”

In the dark his answer came out more intimate than he intended, but Stanford only nodded, as if acknowledging a fact already plain.

The messenger left for Wagga before dawn with one of Hunter’s best horses in the float and a station driver who knew every rut in the road. Nothing remained for the rest of them but

waiting, which no camp does gracefully. Men cleaned gear, smoked, sharpened combs, swore at card games, and revisited the same arguments in slightly altered language. By ten o'clock even the loudest union firebrands had begun to wilt under inactivity.

Stoate, however, seemed invigorated by suspense. He moved among the men speaking quietly to one group and then another, restoring alarm where it had begun to fade. He had the gift, if gift it was, of making ordinary prudence sound like treachery. Bill saw him twice in close conversation with the younger fellows from the previous day, and once with a teamster who had arrived overnight carrying news from another station. Whatever passed between them, it left the teamster looking excited and important.

At noon Macdonald sent round word that no liquor was to be brought into camp and no outside agitator was to harangue the shed without permission. The order was sensible enough; it was also fuel on an existing fire. Stoate declared it intimidation. Macdonald replied that if intimidation were intended, Stoate would not have to guess at it.

The answer from Wagga came just after two.

The station truck was heard before it was seen, rattling over the rise in a haze of white dust. Men came out of the quarters and the cookhouse and the shade of the wagon sheds all at once. The driver jumped down, handed a sealed envelope to Macdonald, and stood by while the overseer broke it open with his thumb.

Macdonald read. Read again. Then looked up with a grim satisfaction that told Bill enough before a word was spoken.

"Well?" Stoate called.

Macdonald's voice carried across the yard. "Wagga advises that existing union sheds under signed agreement are to continue unless a specific local grievance exists. Tandara is to resume immediately."

The reaction was instant and mixed. Relief broke across half the camp like weather. Men laughed, swore, slapped one another on the shoulder, and began at once talking of lost time to be made up. The other half stood sullen or embarrassed. Stoate himself went very still. His face altered in a way Bill would remember later: not merely anger, but the humiliation of a man who has promised history and been answered by procedure.

He recovered quickly enough to say, "That message can be challenged."

Macdonald folded the paper with care. "Challenge it from the road, then. The board starts in twenty minutes."

One of the younger men asked uneasily whether committee would still review Tandara's conduct. Stanford told him committee could review the moon if it had leisure for such nonsense; he intended to resume earning wages.

That settled more than one doubtful conscience. Men drifted toward the shed.

Stoate made a final effort. He climbed the wool table again, but the gesture had lost its magic. He spoke of surrender, precedent, the need for unity, the danger of letting owners divide workers by concessions. He was not wrong in every abstract point. Bill knew that. But Stoate had squandered the confidence

required to carry men into sacrifice. No one wanted a lecture now. They wanted the handpieces humming again, the tally rising, the season put back on track.

When Stoate saw he had lost them, he changed tack in an instant.

“Very well,” he said crisply. “The branch has clarified. We resume in discipline and good order.”

The shamelessness of it drew open contempt at last. Somebody laughed straight in his face. Another voice from the back cried, “Hear that? He’s in favor now.” Even some of Stoate’s followers smiled despite themselves.

Bill watched him step down from the table with the stiff self-possession of a cat that has misjudged a jump and intends to treat the mistake as intentional. Dangerous men were often ridiculous at the moment they failed. It did not make them safe.

The board started again.

The great belts and motors took up their vibration. Handpieces clicked and whined. The first sheep came down protesting from the catching pens. Wool rolled away white and cream and dust-colored onto the boards. Outside, the press creaked back to work. The whole station seemed to exhale.

Bill found his rhythm quickly, more from relief than calm. Sheep after sheep ran through his hands, each one another argument against idle doctrines and another step toward Chidowla, Jenny, Billy’s toy horse, Mary’s clothes, the Donahue boundary, the future in fence-posts and water lines and honest improvements.

Yet all through the afternoon he felt Stoate's presence somewhere beyond direct sight. Not speaking now, not interfering openly, but storing the day. Men like that never forgave public diminishment. They waited for roads, camps, committee rooms, dark nights, and private opportunities.

At smoko Stanford came over and drank tea beside him in companionable silence. After a while he said, "Best keep your eyes open when this run's done."

Bill glanced sideways. "You think he'll make trouble?"

"I think trouble is the only trade he understands."

The answer sat with Bill after the break ended and into evening. When at last the day's tally was posted, the men who had wanted to walk were almost as eager as any to calculate how much could still be recovered if the rest of the run went cleanly. Arithmetic had reasserted itself. Bill was glad of that, but not comforted. The camp had resumed its labor; the quarrel beneath it had only changed form.

That night, after supper, he stepped out behind the quarters. The sky above the river country was so large and hard with stars that it made a man feel reduced to one more working creature under weather. The wind had risen at last, carrying the smell of dust and stock and the faint sweetness of crushed herbage from the flat. Somewhere in the darkness horses shifted against their tethers.

He thought of Chidowla again. Of Jenny perhaps reading his letter in the kitchen with Mary asleep and Billy asking questions she would answer without seeming to. Of the paddocks silvered

under moonlight. Of the little cottage holding out against the dark because two people had decided it must.

This was what he had chosen in the shed. Not merely wages. Not even merely common sense. A side.

The next morning the work held. And the next. Stoate kept to his own part of the board, speaking little except to those already nearest him. But his silence had become more eloquent than his speeches. It made other men cautious. It made Bill cautious too.

On the third evening Macdonald came through the quarters and told three of the shearers there would be a team moving down-river after the run, where another station needed experienced men. "Good country if you don't talk too much and work hard," he said. "Bad country if you do the opposite."

Bill put his name down at once. More work meant more wages. More wages meant Chidowla. It also meant, he suspected, more miles in which Stoate might choose to revisit the insult he had suffered at Tandara.

When he told Stanford, the big shearer nodded once.

"So am I," he said. "If we go, we go in company."

Bill was absurdly grateful for that.

The Tandara dispute, which had looked for one boiling hour as though it might break the whole run, settled outwardly into routine. Sheep came in and sheep went out. Tallies climbed. Men joked again. The lost day became something to complain of rather than something to dread. Yet under the routine the lines had been drawn and would not be undrawn. Stanford had emerged as the

practical leader of one kind of man. Stoate remained the darling of another. Bill, by speaking when he had, had been marked by both.

Toward the end of the week, as the afternoon sun slanted through the high boards and turned the wool dust golden, Bill looked across the shed and saw Stoate watching him from the far stand with the same thin, measuring expression he had worn on the wool table the day of the vote.

Not angry now. Not even heated.

Calculating.

Bill turned back to the sheep in his hands, but a sensation like cold water had passed through him.

The worst quarrels were not always the loud ones. Sometimes they began in silence, after the talking was done, and waited for the road.

Chapter 3

Down the River

The compromise at Tandara lasted less than an hour, though for Bill Hardwick it remained years in his memory as one of those brief intervals in which a man believes sense may yet hold the world together.

By common consent, and against every effort Stoate made to turn the place into a shouting pit, the men agreed that no final step would be taken until the order had been confirmed at Wagga. A rider would go in at once. Until he returned, the board would stand idle and the tally remain where it was. It was a bad

arrangement, but not the worst. It preserved wages already half-earned, gave the older men time to think, and kept Jack Macdonald from laying violent hands on the delegate before sunset.

Stoate accepted the decision with a face like hammered tin. Bill could see him calculating as he listened, swallowing defeat only because he meant to recover it later and with interest. He folded the message, climbed down from the wool table, and began at once to work among the looser-minded men in knots and corners, speaking low and urgently, as if reason had not prevailed but treachery.

The shed did not resume. No one had heart enough for that. The men drifted outside in clumps, some toward the fire, some toward the horse-yard, some toward the river where the late light made a broad copper band between the reeds. Bill washed, changed his shirt, and went to stand with Stanford under the lee of the cookhouse.

“Well,” Stanford said, as if remarking on weather. “We’ve bought ourselves a night.”

Bill nodded. “Maybe a day.”

“Maybe that too.”

Stanford was older than Bill by ten years and looked older by twenty in certain lights. Shearing had written itself on him in scars, shoulder-thickness, and a permanent economy of motion, as if even his breath must justify itself by work done. He held his pannikin of tea in both hands and looked out toward the camp without much expression.

“You know what’ll happen if Wagga backs the order,” he said.

“We walk?”

“We’re told to walk. That’s not always the same thing.”

Bill thought of Jenny then with the accuracy of a blade. She would have the children fed by now. Billy would be at the table swinging his legs and asking questions that never ended. Mary would be throwing spoonfuls of whatever was set before her and laughing when corrected. The house would smell of bread and soap and warm iron from the stove. The image came with such force that for a moment the station yard around him looked thin and makeshift by comparison, a temporary arrangement of men and tin and noise with no proper root in the world.

“I didn’t come here to play politics,” he said.

“No married man ever does.”

“But politics comes looking.”

Stanford gave him the nearest thing to a smile Bill had yet seen on him. “Aye. Mostly at the worst time.”

That evening the camp divided itself in the same invisible lines the vote had revealed. Some men sat openly with Stoate and his followers, proud of their militancy and already talking of district action, union discipline, and the lesson to be taught employers who imagined that a signed agreement ended the matter. Others kept to themselves, unwilling to quarrel but more unwilling still to throw away a season’s money for the pleasure of hearing fiery speeches made by men with no mortgages. Bill moved among the latter sort. He did not harangue anybody. He had said what he thought in the shed and saw no point in saying it

twice to men who had families of their own and knew arithmetic as well as he did.

The reply from Wagga came next afternoon.

Stoate had the message before anyone else and took care to read it where he could command a crowd. The district committee upheld the stoppage. Any union man continuing in the shed after six o'clock would answer for it before the executive.

There was less uproar than on the first day. That was the worst of it. Anger a man could answer. Discouragement sank into people more dangerously. Men stood and stared at the dust, at the yards, at the sheep still waiting unsheared, at the half-completed season hanging before them like a gate slammed in the face. A few cursed. A few laughed with that dry edge men use when they are nearest despair. One young fellow from Hay kicked his bedding roll clean across the camp and sat down on it with his head in his hands.

Macdonald came down from the office at a pace that told its own story. He had spoken with Hunter and did not trouble to hide the result.

"If you leave this shed now," he said, "you leave the place. No man takes station stores, station flour, station meat, station tea, or station forage under the idea that he'll campaign against us at our expense. We'll settle honest wages earned. We won't fund nonsense."

"No one asked you to," Stoate shot back.

Macdonald rounded on him. "You've asked it every hour since you came."

For one dangerous instant Bill thought they would come to blows. Then Stanford stepped between them with such calm authority that even Macdonald checked himself.

“Enough,” Stanford said. “We’ve the message. Men can make their choice.”

Choice, Bill thought, was a handsome word for a poor business. Yet choice it remained.

At six the board was empty.

Bill packed his swag with deliberate care, keeping his temper by attending to straps, buckles, rolled blankets, and the small order of his few belongings. Around him men did the same. Stoate moved from group to group with the air of a field marshal after victory, arranging the line of march, assigning camps, speaking of solidarity and district discipline and the need to present a united face as they moved down-country. Bill avoided him as long as possible. It was not long enough.

“We’re making for Moorara,” Stoate said, appearing at his shoulder. “Committee’s there. Plenty of our men too.”

Bill cinched the final strap on his swag. “I’m not bound for any committee.”

“You’re bound with the rest of us until things are settled.”

“I am not.”

Stoate’s eyes hardened. “It won’t do, Hardwick, for certain men to stir opposition in one shed and then slip away before the district has heard them.”

Bill stood slowly upright.

“Take care,” he said.

For a second Stoate looked almost amused. Then he shrugged and let the matter pass with a mock-careless lift of his hands. But Bill saw the warning in him as plainly as if it had been spoken.

The procession left Tandara next morning: men on horseback, men on foot, a few utes and battered trucks carrying swags, cooking gear, odd tools, and whatever stores had been honestly purchased beforehand. The season had broken warm. The country opened in long pale runs of grass and saltbush under a sky that gave no shade. By noon the dust had worked into every cuff, seam, and fold of clothing. Bill rode part of the way with Stanford. They conserved speech as bush men do when the road is long and the company mixed.

Toward evening they camped near a bend of the river where red gums leaned over the bank and the water, low from earlier heat, ran dark and sluggish between shelves of cracked mud. Fires sprang up one by one. Billy-cans went on. Somebody produced a concertina. Somebody else told him to go to blazes. The argument improved the general spirits more than the music would have done.

Bill sat a little outside the largest circle and wrote to Jenny by firelight on his knee. He told her that the strike had gone against him and Stanford; that the shed had shut; that he was moving with the others for the present because there was no immediate road home with certainty of work; that he had kept clear of foolishness so far and meant to go on doing so. He did not tell her how uneasy he felt under Stoate’s eye. There was no use sending worry into a house already carrying enough.

He had just folded the pages when Stanford lowered himself to the ground beside him.

“You’re marked,” Stanford said.

Bill glanced up. Across the camp Stoate stood half-turned to the firelight, speaking to two men Bill did not know well, young fellows from farther north who carried themselves with the loose readiness of men to whom a shove and a punch are merely another form of speech.

“I know it.”

“You mean to bolt?”

“I mean to leave when I can leave clean.”

“There’s no clean road out of this lot now.”

Bill looked at the letter in his hand. “There must be.”

Stanford rubbed the back of his neck and stared into the dark. “If you try for home direct, they’ll say you’re breaking discipline. If you go forward with them, they’ll say you’re under discipline. Either way Stoate gets his story.”

“What would you do?”

“Same as I am doing. Keep my eyes open and my horse where I can reach him.”

They moved on at dawn.

The days that followed blurred in Bill’s memory into heat, river flats, camps that seemed much like one another, and a continuous undertone of argument. The men were not of one mind, however much Stoate and his friends pretended otherwise. Some had begun to regret the stoppage almost as soon as it was made. Some had expected immediate support from every shed in the district

and were affronted to discover that station owners and shearers alike had private judgements not always aligned with union messages. Some simply wanted fresh work and a road out of the business. Yet no one wished to be the first man openly named a coward or traitor. Pride held some. Weariness held others. A few stayed because the camps fed them. Many because they did not see how to separate themselves from the main body without trouble.

Bill rode, walked, and watched.

The country changed as they went lower down. The great stations seemed farther apart and yet more entangled in one another, linked by stock routes, river access, supply roads, family alliances, grudges, and the constant commerce of rumor. Men in towns and at fuel stops knew more than they should have known about the dispute before the parties themselves arrived. A photo of the Tandara walkout, taken by some fool with a phone and flung onto local social media before signal died again in the back country, had spread far enough that strangers recognized Stoate by sight at two different roadhouses and treated him either as a hero or a pest according to their politics.

Bill found that modernity had added almost nothing useful to a quarrel of this kind except speed. Lies traveled faster now, that was all.

At one camp near Mooni Creek he heard his own name mentioned from the far side of a fire and caught the phrases “against the men” and “stood with the bosses” before the speaker lowered his voice. At another, he woke in the dark to the sound of somebody fumbling near the horse line and found one of the northern lads

pretending to look for a lost tobacco pouch within inches of Bill’s bay gelding. Bill said nothing then. He merely stood up in his shirt sleeves and let the man see by the shape of him that any further confusion might be expensive.

The fellow found his tobacco elsewhere.

On the fourth day they came in sight of Moorara.

The station lay wide and low beyond a line of lignum and box, its homestead set back among older trees, the outbuildings and yards spread along a slight rise above the river flats. But it was not the station itself that held Bill’s eye. It was the camp drawn up beyond the boundary: a long, irregular township of tents, trucks, horse-floats, tarpaulins, smoke, tethered horses, cooking pits, stacked water drums, portable toilets, battered solar panels propped against crates, and men moving everywhere through dust and heat. There were far more of them than Bill had expected. A strike camp, but with the look of something half military and half carnival.

“Sweet heaven,” Stanford muttered beside him.

Stoate, hearing and mistaking the tone, smiled with satisfaction. “District strength,” he said. “Wait till the owners see what they’re up against.”

Bill had no great love for owners as a class and less for theatrics. What he saw in the camp was idleness with a headquarters, grievance given an encampment and encouraged to think itself history. A man could disappear in such a place. Not vanish entirely, perhaps, but be swallowed, misnamed, delayed, dealt with out of ordinary sight. The thought came to him so

strongly that he felt, for the first time in years, the old tightening under the ribs he had known as a younger man when a horse went bad under him in rough country.

They were challenged before they reached the outer fires.

A pair of mounted pickets rode forward, one with a union badge on his hat, both of them carrying the stiff importance of men given temporary authority and delighted by it. Stoate announced the Tandara party. Names were demanded. Names were written down on a tablet by a clerkish fellow sitting at a folding camp table under a bit of shadecloth, as if this were a customs barrier and not a patch of dusty riverbank.

When Bill gave his name, the clerk looked up.

“Hardwick?”

“Yes.”

The look passed between him and Stoate so quickly another man might have missed it. Bill did not.

“What’s that for?” he asked.

“Routine,” said Stoate.

Bill said no more, because he had suddenly become certain that the business at Tandara had reached Moorara before he did, and reached it in Stoate’s version.

The camp swallowed them.

For the rest of that afternoon Bill kept near Stanford and avoided the central marquee where speeches were said to be made and district resolutions drafted. Men came and went from that tent with the solemn faces of people who enjoy having their time wasted under an official name. Everywhere else there was the same

idle movement proper to camps where too many mouths wait upon too little useful occupation: card games under tarps, boots being mended, horses watered, complaints repeated, old arguments taken up again, somebody frying onions in blackened fat, somebody cursing the water truck for being late, somebody else making a speech to six unwilling listeners about the future of labour in the Commonwealth.

By evening Bill had decided on a course. He would leave before dawn, alone if he must, and make first for a siding where he knew a carrier who might sell him fuel and tell him where fresh work could be found. If no shed was open, he would go home. Better a fortnight's lost wages than one hour more under Stoate's management.

He was coiling the reins near the horse line when Stanford came up.

"You're not the only man thinking of disappearing early," Stanford said quietly.

"How many?"

"Three, maybe four. The others don't fancy being seen with you."

Bill gave a short laugh without mirth. "That's heartening."

"They're scared of being hauled up."

"Hauled up by whom?"

Stanford looked toward the lit marquee. "By whoever's decided they can."

Bill followed his glance. Men were gathering there now in larger numbers than before. A lantern swung at the entrance. Two

fellows he had not noticed earlier stood one on either side like sentries.

“Trouble?” Bill asked.

“For some.”

That was all Stanford had time to say. A voice behind them called, “Hardwick!”

Bill turned.

Two men advanced from the dark. One was the northern lad who had been sniffing round the horse line the previous night. The other was broader and older, with a red moustache and the heavy forearms of a man used to loading wool bales or lifting kegs. Neither looked eager. That, more than anything, sharpened Bill’s attention. Men who enjoy rough work come smiling to it.

“What is it?” Bill said.

“The committee wants you.”

“I’ve no business before any committee.”

“That’s not our concern.”

Stanford stepped a little nearer. “He can go in the morning.”

“No,” said the broader man. “Now.”

Bill might still have broken from them then if Stoate had not appeared just beyond, hands in pockets, watching with the composed interest of a man attending a play he has paid to see. The sight of him settled Bill against making a scramble of it. He would not be run down before half the camp like a thief.

He handed Stanford the reins.

“If I’m not back in twenty minutes, keep my horse saddled.”

Stanford took them. “I will.”

The marquee was hotter than the evening outside. Lanterns hung from the poles and filled the canvas with a yellow, breathless light. Men stood along the sides three and four deep. At the far end a trestle table had been set up on packing crates and covered with a blanket to give it dignity. Behind it sat five men of varying ages, expressions, and degrees of self-importance. One took notes. One had spectacles low on his nose and the air of a provincial lawyer who has been denied the proper courtroom he thinks he deserves. One was asleep or nearly so. The man in the center, heavy-jawed and carefully grave, evidently served as chairman.

Bill stopped three paces short of the table.

“Well?” he said.

A murmur ran through the tent at the tone of him.

The chairman folded his hands. “William Hardwick, lately of the Tandara shed, you have been named before this committee as having urged men to defy the district order and continue work in a shed called out under union authority.”

“I urged men to think for themselves.”

“We will decide what your urging amounted to.”

“No,” Bill said. “You’ll decide what Stoate told you it amounted to.”

Stoate remained at the side of the tent where all could see him, expression wounded into righteousness.

The man with spectacles leaned forward. “Answer properly.”

“I’ve answered properly enough.”

The hearing, if hearing it could be called, went on in that fashion for near half an hour. The charges multiplied as needed. Bill had spoken against the order. Bill had weakened solidarity. Bill had supported the owner’s position. Bill had threatened a delegate. Bill had attempted to persuade others to break district discipline. Bill had said no committee had the right to rule free men in a fair shed. Bill had sown disunion. Bill had represented, in effect, the employer’s case from within the ranks.

Some of it was true in substance. Most of it was dressed and twisted. None of it, Bill thought, warranted the absurd gravity of the proceedings. Yet the danger lay not in justice misapplied but in theatre mistaken for power by men who had forgotten the distinction.

At last the chairman said, “Pending a full district review, this committee orders that you remain in camp and present yourself tomorrow for final disposition.”

Bill stared at him. “Orders?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll go where I please.”

Two men moved behind him before he had fully taken in the room’s intention.

He turned at once, but not quickly enough. The broader one seized his right arm. The younger man went for the left. Bill heaved once and shook them both half loose; then three more were on him. Someone shouted. Somebody else laughed. His shoulder struck a pole hard enough to jar his teeth. He drove back with all his weight, flung one man off, and would likely have cleared

the tent entrance if a blow from behind had not landed just below the ear and set the lantern light swinging blackly across his sight.

When he could see again he was outside, with six men around him and Stanford breaking through the crowd too late to matter.

“What the hell is this?” Stanford roared.

“Committee order,” said Stoate.

Bill found his footing and stood breathing hard. Blood ran warm down his neck where the blow had split the skin.

“You touch me again,” he said to no one and all of them, “and one of you won’t stand up after.”

No one answered. That was answer enough. They marched him to a storage shed at the edge of the camp—a rough weatherboard place used for tack, spare tools, and feed when the station itself had overflow. Its proper owner, Bill guessed, had not been consulted. A lantern was hung on a nail just inside. There were sacks in one corner, a broken chair, coils of old rope, and a smell of dust, leather, and mouse droppings.

“You’ll stop there tonight,” said the red-moustached man, not meeting Bill’s eye.

“Under whose law?”

“Under the committee’s.”

Bill laughed then, the sound raw and dangerous even to himself. “You poor fools.”

The door shut. A bolt went over outside.

For a while he did nothing but stand in the lantern light with his hands at his sides and master the impulse to throw

himself bodily at the boards until something split. Anger came easy. Calculation took longer. He tested the window first. Too small. The back planks had been repaired with newer timber and held fast. The hinges on the door were old but bolted from outside, and he had no tool worth the name except a pocketknife.

After a time footsteps approached. The bolt scraped. Stanford came in sideways, ducking under the lintel, with a pannikin of tea and a strip of torn shirt for Bill's neck.

"I've five minutes," he said.

Bill sat on the broken chair and let him examine the cut.

"It's nothing."

"It'll make a fine exhibit."

Stanford tied the cloth hard enough to sting. "I tried for Macdonald. No use. Moorara's people won't meddle inside the camp unless blood starts running in buckets."

"Good Christian rule."

"Hunter's sent word to men he knows. That may help tomorrow. Or make them hurry."

Bill drank the tea. It was stewed to bitterness and still welcome.

"What do they mean to do?"

"Make you recant, likely. Or hold you until enough others are frightened into obedience."

Bill leaned his head back against the wall and shut his eyes for a moment. In the darkness behind them he saw Jenny again, not in softness this time but in anger: standing at the kitchen table with both hands braced on the boards, hearing this story from him

and saying in a voice quiet as frost that she had warned him from the beginning what sort of man Stoate was.

“She’ll say she told me so,” he murmured.

“Who?”

“My wife.”

Stanford’s mouth moved once. “Then you may still count yourself fortunate.”

He left as he had come, with no promise except that he would keep watch as best he could.

Bill remained awake most of the night. The camp noises dwindled by degrees: argument fading into mutter, mutter into laughter, laughter into isolated shouts, then at last only horses shifting, somebody coughing far off, the river making its dark slow sound beyond the flats. Through a crack in the boards he could see a slice of stars. The lantern burned down. Mosquitoes found him. The cloth at his neck dried stiff.

Toward dawn, with his body aching from the scuffle and his mind worn thin by sleeplessness, one thought returned and returned until it seemed the only steady object in the world: he must get home. Not to save pride. Not even to save wages. Simply to get clear of camps, committees, slogans, and men who loved power best when it wore improvised clothes. To get back to the one place where work meant something plain.

When the first light crept through the cracks, the bolt lifted again.

Stoate stood outside with two others behind him.

“Well,” he said brightly. “Ready to be reasonable?”

Bill rose from the chair with such deliberate calm that Stoate took one involuntary step backward.

“Open the yard,” Bill said. “Or stand aside when I come through it.”

For a second the morning held them both: Stoate with his brittle smile, Bill with dried blood on his collar and all the night’s anger settled into something harder. Then Stoate’s expression changed. Not to fear. He was too vain for that. But to the recognition that this was not over, that whatever story he told about Bill Hardwick in the committee tents and the campfires of Moorara, the man himself remained stubbornly, inconveniently alive inside it.

That was enough for the morning.

Not enough for the days to come.

Chapter 4

The Assize, Part I

The newspaper came in on a Thursday and lay on the kitchen table all that evening like a thing alive.

Jenny Hardwick did not sit down to read it so much as attack it. She had brought it in with the rest of the mail, unfolded it while the kettle boiled, and stood by the table under the smoky lamp with Mary fretting at her skirt and Billy asking whether there was anything in it about the races. She had expected the usual run of district gossip, cattle prices, drought talk from the west, some parliamentary foolishness from Sydney, and perhaps another pious editorial on law and order from men whose boots never carried them farther than a verandah.

Instead she found Bill's name.

For a moment she did not understand what she was looking at. The words arranged themselves plainly enough. Committed for trial. Wagga Wagga. The burning of the Dundonald. Evidence heard at Dilga. Several prisoners remanded. One sentence after another. Yet all of it seemed to belong to some world next to hers rather than her own, as if the print had shifted sideways and attached itself by error to William Hardwick, selector of Chidowla, husband, father, shearer, the man who stacked wood true and milked quietly in bad weather and never raised a hand to beast or child except in kindness.

Then understanding struck, and with it a heat so violent that for an instant she thought she might faint.

She sat because her knees failed, but she did not cry then. She read every line twice. She read the names. Abershaw. Dawker. Lynch. O'Halloran. Stoate. She came back to Stoate and pressed her thumb against the printed letters until the ink blurred. Billy, who had never seen his mother still for so long while daylight remained, went quiet. Mary began to fuss in earnest. Jenny folded the paper once, very carefully, and laid it on the table as if by neatness alone she might prevent the world from worsening further.

After the children were in bed she read Bill's last letter again. It had arrived three days earlier, folded in the usual rough way and marked with dust from half the river country. He had written that he was done with Stoate and done with the union's bullying. He had written that once his cheque cleared he meant to come straight home and cut himself loose from the lot of

them. He had written of Jenny's ring fence, of Dick Donahue's neglected block, of the sort of gate he meant to hang at the lower paddock if they got the place. Every line was Bill. Practical, hopeful, a little awkward when he tried to write anything tender. No man planning to burn a riverboat wrote of hinges and calves and whether the mare still favored her near foreleg on the steep pull by the creek.

Jenny slept little. When she did sleep she dreamed of the road south and of Bill behind bars calling to her through a wall she could not get around. Before daylight she had risen, dressed in her best dark frock, and put her butter money into the pocket sewn inside the bodice. She left the newspaper where it lay. There was no use pretending now that if she did not look at it the thing might undo itself.

By the time the old mare was in the shafts and the children wrapped against the dawn chill, Jenny's face had changed into the expression Bill knew and respected most: the look she wore when a thing was terrible but could still be worked at.

Talmorah was twenty rough miles away, and the road was no kinder for being known. In dry weather it wore ruts hard as fired brick; after rain it became a red glue that clung to the wheels and dragged a horse to a standstill. This morning the ground was merely uneven and the creek crossings cold enough to splash Jenny's skirts dark to the knee. Billy sat beside her in his good shirt, grave with the importance of being taken into confidence. Mary dozed, woke, whimpered, and slept again with her rag doll clutched by one arm. The bush opened and shut around them by

turns, strips of pale trunks and dark gullies, then long climbs where the mare labored and Jenny leaned forward as if she could lend the animal her own resolve.

It was full morning by the time the township came into view. Talmorah did not improve under scrutiny. A pair of hotels facing one another over dust, a forge, a store, the police station with a lock-up hardly big enough for two drunks, the bank, the bus stop, and enough men on verandahs to form an opinion on any woman who drove in without her husband. Jenny knew every inch of it and cared less than usual who looked at her. She tied the mare, took the children by the hand, and entered the bank.

Mr. Calthorpe had only lately come to the district and still possessed that quality city-trained men sometimes managed for a few years before the country wore it out of them: he listened as if your trouble were not one more demand upon his time but the thing before him deserving actual thought. He saw the children, the dust on Jenny's hem, and the effort by which she held herself upright. He drew out a chair. He sent for water and milk. He said her name in a way that made it possible, for the first time since she had opened the newspaper, to stop pretending she could carry the whole thing alone.

The weeping humiliated her afterwards. While it was upon her she could not help it. She bent over her handkerchief and sobbed from somewhere deeper than the lungs, each breath tearing at the next. Billy pressed into her side without a sound. Mary cried because Billy looked frightened. Calthorpe remained where he was,

not bustling, not soothing her like a child, simply waiting until the storm passed.

When she had herself in hand again she told him the truth cleanly. Bill had been arrested. Bill had been committed. Bill had not done the thing charged. Stoate had sworn to make trouble and had done so. Here was Bill's own letter. Read it. Read what kind of man writes of home and wages and breaking free when he has wickedness on his mind, if you can.

Calthorpe read every line. Jenny watched his face rather than the paper. There was the smallest alteration about the eyes when he reached the passage about cutting loose from the union. He laid the letter down and said, with a dryness that carried more feeling than a louder man might have shown, that strikes were doing a world of harm but indignation would not get Bill out of jail. A lawyer might.

At the word lawyer Jenny put the cloth bag of coins on the desk. She had hoarded them a little at a time from butter sales, egg money, cheese, and the modest savings Bill let her keep under her own management because he knew she handled a dollar better than most men handled ten. It was not all they had, but it was the part of the farm she could claim as having passed directly through her hands. She offered it without ceremony. If the liberty of her husband cost the cows, the horse, the block, the roof itself, then so be it. Bill could build again. Bill could earn again. A prison sentence for another man's crime would ruin more than a mortgage.

Calthorpe pushed the bag back toward her and said he held their deeds, knew the account, and would write at once to the bank manager in Wagga. There was a solicitor there, Biddulph, sound enough to be trusted in a matter where the law and politics were knotted together. Witnesses would cost money. Travel would cost money. Delay would cost money. Jenny said yes to all of it before he had done speaking.

When she stepped out into the light again with the children, Talmorah was unchanged, but she was not. The first helplessness had burned off. In its place remained rage and the machinery of action.

She had not gone ten yards before she heard Thornhill's voice behind the bank wall. He was speaking to Calthorpe in the indulgent, over-loud tone of a man who believes that repeating a bad opinion gives it force. Those union fellows are playing the deuce. Serve him right. Men who mix with that crowd must expect trouble. Jenny did not stop. There were two kinds of people in such a business: those who could help and those who could only take satisfaction in being proved gloomy. Thornhill was the second sort.

She drove home under a whitening sky, every practical question already ordering itself in her mind. How much flour remained? Could Biddy Donahue help with the milking if she had to travel again? What might the mare stand in one run? If witnesses were needed from the river country, who would find them? What had become of Bill's cheque? The questions came in such number that fear had less room to move.

The answer to one of them arrived that evening at the Teamsters' Arms, where Calthorpe, delayed by business in town, found a knot of river men around the bar and learned more than the newspaper had bothered to print. Bill, they told him, had been taken with others after the burning, though nobody sensible believed he belonged in the same category as men like Abershaw. Stoate had turned Crown witness. Of course he had. There was no principle in him where self-preservation might do instead. One man said Bill had been seen herded along with the rioters more like a hostage than an accomplice. Another said there were shearers up-country, good men, who would swear Bill had meant to leave the union altogether. Calthorpe listened, bought a round not from conviviality but because it loosened recollections, and took down names.

By dusk he had enough to send a second letter, sharper than the first, to Wagga. He also had the conviction that if the defence were to succeed, someone must gather the truth before Stoate's lies hardened into official memory. He could not leave the bank. Dick Donahue could leave his own affairs if sufficiently stirred. Calthorpe found him at dawn.

The Donahue place had all the signs of a property managed by a man with intelligence enough to begin and too little steadiness to finish. A good line of creek frontage gone ragged at the fencing. Stock half as numerous as the grass might have supported. Bridget Donahue in the yard with a child on one hip and another clinging to her skirt, looking neither surprised nor especially pleased to see a banker arrive before breakfast. Dick

himself came out buttoning his shirt, hair wild, boots unlaced, the remains of the previous night's good intentions visible about him.

Calthorpe wasted no words. Bill Hardwick was in Wagga jail. He would stand trial. Men from the sheds and from the river must be found. Cable and Hannigan at Toovale had likely seen enough to matter. Stanford too, if anyone knew where he had gone. Donahue stared, swore once from the heart, and looked towards Chidowla as if the line of trees between their places might somehow carry Bill's answer back to him.

He was not a man on whom one would build a permanent system. Yet he had in him the one quality indispensable to action in a scattered district: when the need was immediate and visible he could move fast. Within minutes he had a saddle on the bay and a hat in his hand. Bridget asked whether he meant to return sober. He told her it would be a novelty worth praying for. Then he was off southward in a plume of dust, one more figure swallowed by the distances on which all country lives depend.

What happened to Bill between Dilga and Wagga Jenny could only imagine at first, but Bill knew each yard of it.

The petty sessions at Dilga had the air of a place where men were disposed of rather than heard. Heat crowded the room; flies worried the faces of magistrates and prisoners alike; the audience came half for justice and half for spectacle. Bill stood in the dock among men with whom he had no business being associated and felt the contamination of proximity more keenly than the irons on his wrists. Abershaw glowered like a chained

bull. Dawker folded himself into sullenness. Lynch shifted from foot to foot. O'Halloran wore insolence as if it were a neckcloth. Bill sat apart as far as the rail allowed, head in hands, trying to think how a life might be altered by a few lies repeated in the proper room.

Then Stoate entered.

Bill had believed himself prepared. He was not. The first sight of the fellow in the witness box, all calculated reluctance and injured conscience, struck him harder than the arrest had done. Stoate had eaten at his table. Stoate had borrowed tobacco, money, time, and good opinion. He had borrowed the common civility men extend one another on the road. Now he placed a hand on the Bible and swore Bill had stood by the river firing at the steamer or her crew in the dark before dawn.

It was the manner of it that sickened Bill nearly as much as the words. Had Stoate been openly malicious, the lie would at least have worn its own face. Instead he looked grieved. He paused at the right places. He admitted only what moved the story forward and shaded the rest in suggestion. A second witness, coarser and easier to read, called Bill a blackleg before the bench checked him. By then the harm was done.

When the magistrate asked what he had to say for himself, Bill said the plain truth. He had been compelled. He and his mates from Tandara had meant to cut loose. At Moorara they had been trapped, stripped of gear, threatened, shoved into the front rank where bullets might as easily have found them as anyone aboard the boat. He had never fired to hurt a man and had more

reason to shoot some of the rioters than aid them. Stoate, he said, was perjuring himself to ruin him and rob his wife and children of their home.

It was a speech no barrister would have praised. Bill had neither polish nor art. Yet there was something in the room after he finished, a slight drawing back of breath, as if even those most suspicious of union men had heard the note of honesty whether or not they meant to honor it. It made no difference. The bench had heard too many protests from guilty men to distinguish this one in the short time allowed. Bill and the others were committed for trial at the next assizes in Wagga Wagga.

The manacles clicked. That sound remained with him longer than the words. Iron, small and exact, deciding where a man could place his hands.

The drive to Wagga was a long box of dust, diesel, sweat, and silence. Abershaw cursed once, then went inward. Dawker slept or pretended to. Bill sat by the barred opening and watched the same country he had crossed weeks earlier with freedom in front of him now pass like a possession he had already lost. Every creek crossing, every patch of saltbush, every lonely tree standing out of the plain seemed part of the ordinary world from which he had somehow been ejected. He thought of Jenny before he thought of himself. He pictured her reading the paper. He pictured Billy asking questions. The shame of that vision hurt worst of all.

Wagga Jail received him without interest. Institutions rarely cared to distinguish between the innocent, the guilty, and

the merely accused. The wall was high, the gate thick, the yard swept. His cell contained a plank bed, a stool, a bucket, and a window too small to be useful except in proving that sky still existed. There were names scratched into the stone by older desperations. J.M. 3 YRS. God Help Me. Bill traced one with his fingertip and wondered what reduced a man to carving a prayer into a wall he could not leave.

The routines of confinement would have driven a more idle man to collapse. To Bill they became another kind of labor, hateful but measurable. Grey food slid through a slot. The exercise yard circled beneath the sun. Bells marked hours that no longer belonged to him. He forced himself to eat because weakness would not help. He forced himself to walk because to lie down all day was to let the jail enter not merely his body but his mind. At night the noises carried strangely through the corridors: coughing, muttering, one man singing off-key for a minute or two before a warder silenced him, keys at intervals, boots, then long spells of stillness so complete that his own breathing seemed an intrusion.

The interview with Biddulph came as the first event in which Bill recognized the possibility of assistance rather than management. The solicitor was not grand. Bill had expected perhaps some hawk-nosed city creature in fine cloth. Instead Biddulph was a dry, attentive man with a notebook, spectacles, and the habit of asking one question at a time and waiting for the full answer. He wasted neither sympathy nor contempt. Bill

trusted him within ten minutes for the same reason he trusted few men quickly: Biddulph seemed uninterested in embellishment.

He asked first for sequence. When had Bill arrived at Tandara? When had the strike order come? Where had he gone afterwards? Which men were present at Moorara? Who took the cheque? Did Bill carry a gun? Did he discharge it at all? Did he know Stoate previously? Had there been any quarrel? Bill answered as steadily as he could. When he came to Stoate he lost calm enough for Biddulph to see the injury was personal as well as legal.

"Good," Biddulph said, surprising him.

Bill frowned. "Good?"

"That you hate him for a reason I can explain to a jury. Men understand betrayal better than doctrine."

He then laid out the shape of the defence. The Crown meant to ride the temper of the times. A burned steamer on the Darling made a handsome symbol for newspapers and for those who wished to prove the unions had become a species of domestic rebellion. Several of the accused might well be guilty. That cut against Bill because juries often preferred one broad condemnation to six separate acts of thought. Therefore the task was to prise him out from the mass and make him visible as himself: a married selector with a block at Chidowla, a hard worker, not a river firebrand; a man under compulsion, robbed, misused, and then lied against by the very person who had most reason to shift blame.

Witnesses mattered. If Cable and Hannigan from Toovale would swear Bill declared himself done with the union, that helped. If

anyone from Tandara could attest to the split with Stoate, better still. If Stoate could be shown a liar in one matter, the rest of his performance might crack. Biddulph had already sent subpoenas where possible. Expenses would be a nuisance. Mrs. Hardwick, he added, had shown remarkable spirit.

At that, Bill had to look away. The idea of Jenny moving through bank offices and solicitors' letters on his behalf filled him with pride and misery at once. He asked if she knew much. Biddulph said she knew enough, and more by the day no doubt. Bill pressed both hands between his knees until the knuckles whitened.

Out in the district, men were indeed being summoned.

At Toovale the woolshed roared with the old familiar sounds Bill had lately believed he might never hear again: handpieces clipping, rouseabouts shouting, fleeces thrown, the great practical music of a shed running at speed. Into this came Donahue, white with dust, to fetch Cyrus Cable and Martin Hannigan between tallies. Donahue was not a man anyone mistook for the law, yet a printed summons in an officer's hand followed close enough behind him to lend the news force. Bill Hardwick was up for trial. Stoate had turned witness. If decent men intended decency to survive, they had better leave room in their week for Wagga.

Cable, who possessed the deliberate temper of a man rarely surprised into speech, read the subpoena and said he would have come on foot without it. Hannigan cursed Stoate by name and reputation and needed only a warning from Cable to reserve some of that vigor for the witness stand. Donahue rode on from there

to such other names as he could gather, becoming by accident of loyalty more useful than he had ever yet been in the management of his own affairs.

At Chidowla the days narrowed into work.

Jenny discovered quickly that grief is easiest borne when there is no choice but to keep moving. The cows still needed milking. Milk still needed setting, skimming, churning. Butter did not shape itself. Fences had no respect for a woman's distress. Water remained heavy whether carried by a happy hand or a desperate one. If she stopped to think too long, images came: Bill in irons; Bill among criminals; Bill hearing Stoate lie. So she worked.

Dawn found her at the dairy with sleeves rolled and arms bare to the elbow in the cold. Midmorning found her on the verandah at the churn, the handle rising and falling until shoulder and back burned. Noon found her splitting wood or hauling feed, then walking the lower fence line with staples and hammer. In the evening she carried water from the creek and checked the henhouse against foxes. The body accepted such demands if one issued them firmly enough. It was the mind that rebelled, usually at night, when the children were asleep and Bill's side of the bed remained smooth.

Biddy Donahue came each morning with one or more of her brood and took half the burden without being asked twice. She was no sentimentalist, Biddy. Her kindness had practical hands. She fed Mary when Jenny was late from the paddock, watched Billy when he wandered too near the creek, and sat sometimes at the table in

the dusk with silence so companionable it amounted to speech. The two women did not discuss fear unless it became unavoidable. Country people know that dread named too often grows teeth.

Then Biddulph's letter arrived.

Jenny broke the seal at the table and read that the trial would be heard at Wagga on the twenty-third of December. Witnesses were being gathered. Her attendance, while not legally necessary, might strengthen Bill's spirits and prove useful if character evidence were required. She had known before finishing the first paragraph that she would go. By the last she was already pulling the travelling trunk from beneath the bed.

Billy came when called and stood with the solemn expectancy children wear when adults begin choosing clothes in unusual combinations.

"We're going to see your father," Jenny told him.

That produced first joy, then confusion when she did not smile in return.

"Is he coming home?" Billy asked.

Jenny, who hated being lied to and tried not to practice on her own children, took his face in both hands. "I don't know. That is what the court is for. To decide."

He considered this. "What's a court?"

"A place where people go to find out the truth," she said, though even while saying it she knew the statement required charity.

The road to Wagga was longer than any journey she had made alone with the children. She packed bread, cheese, apples, a rug,

Mary's doll, a spare shirt for Billy, Bill's good shirt though she could not have said why except that he might wish to see something of home, and the documents which now formed a second domestic life within the first: letters, receipts, Calthorpe's note, Biddulph's instructions. Biddy stood at the gate before dawn and said God go with you. Jenny answered by giving instructions about the cows and the vegetable garden because if she had answered feeling with feeling she might not have left at all.

Those twenty hours on the road marked her. Later she would remember them not as a sequence but as one long band of fatigue crossed by particulars. A creek where Billy nearly slipped climbing down to relieve himself. Mary asleep with her mouth open against Jenny's arm. The mare's ears in the moonlight, rising and falling. A public house yard where the children drank milk while Jenny swallowed tea too hot to taste. A stretch of plain so empty that the stars seemed to begin at the edge of the cart. Dust in the throat, dust in the lashes, dust in the bread. Once, near dawn, she felt herself drifting and brought the whip down more sharply than the old mare deserved. She murmured apology into the mane at the next stop and fed the animal by hand.

Wagga Wagga announced itself first by traffic, then by noise, then by the sudden appearance of buildings large enough to imply a world beyond selectors and sheds. The Murrumbidgee gleamed broad and indifferent beside the town. Hotels, drapers, saddlers, banks, stores, a post office with pretensions to civic dignity, all stood under verandahs alive with spectators. Assize

week had turned the place festive in the uneasy way criminal proceedings often excite communities not themselves under direct threat. The judge's car rolled through the main street to general admiration. Police uniforms flashed blue in the sun. Jurymen gathered in little knots, conscious of being temporarily important. Union men hung back watchful and angry. Squatters' wives claimed the better vantage points. Boys ran errands and repeated rumors. It seemed to Jenny that half the state had assembled to see whether the law could distinguish a good man from bad company.

She had driven nearly without rest and still arrived only just in time.

When she reached the courthouse, the crowd at the door took one look at the dust on her dress, the children in her hands, and the expression on her face, and made room without being asked. There are occasions when a woman's exhaustion carries an authority not even the idle dare dispute. Inside, the room swam before her for one instant. The high ceiling, the packed benches, the wigs and gowns, the dock with its rail, the rows of faces all turned toward the bench, then toward her. A police sergeant guided her forward with unexpected gentleness and murmured to the Judge that she was the prisoner's wife, just off the coach after twenty hours' travel.

The Judge, to his credit, offered her the witnesses' room and refreshment. Jenny straightened. She had not crossed ranges and plains to be hidden while others determined Bill's life. She said as much in simpler words. She had come a long way to hear

her man tried on a false charge, if ever there was one, and she hoped the Court would let her see it out. She would not disturb proceedings again.

Permission was granted.

Only then did Bill turn and see her.

He sat at the far end of the dock, paler than she had ever known him, the prison clothes wrong on his body because they denied his usual air of self-possession. Yet the face was his, the shoulders his, the eyes above all his. For one suspended instant the whole crowded room went away. There was only Bill looking across the polished floor and iron rails at the woman who had come for him, and Jenny looking back with all the miles, labor, rage, and fidelity of the past weeks gathered in her expression.

No word passed between them. None could have done better than the look.

The clerk rose to call the matter on, papers crackling in his hand, and the machinery of the trial began.

Chapter 5

The Assize, Part II

Bill had thought, once the verdict in his own case was spoken and the iron certainty of prison lifted from his shoulders, that his body would remember how to rest. It did not. Freedom had arrived too late in the day and at too high a cost to look simple. Even after the jury set him loose and the courtroom emptied and Jenny led the children through the press of strangers toward him, some part of him had gone on waiting for a hand at his collar, an officer's voice, a correction from the bench. Men were not put back together at a word merely because the right word had at last been spoken.

So he lay awake in the boarding-house room above the bakery at Wagga and listened to the floorboards settle in the dark, to a cart in the street below, to the thin crying of some infant in another room, to the soft breathing of his own children, and he understood that release was not the same thing as peace. Peace, if it came at all, would come later and by degrees.

Before dawn Jenny rose. He heard the washstand jug, the scrape of the chair, the small practical sounds she made when she was setting the day in order before any complaint or fear had the chance to get hold of it. By the time the first red began at the edge of the window she was dressed and had the children ready. Billy was solemn in his clean shirt. Mary, sleepy and warm from the bed, carried the rag doll by one limp arm and looked at the world with the injured patience of a child who believed adults arranged these early mornings out of spite.

Jenny crossed to the bed and held out a mug of tea.

"Drink it while it's hot," she said. "We've one more morning in that court, and then I mean to see the back of Wagga for a long while."

Bill took the mug and sat up. His wrists still showed the fading bruised marks where the irons had rested. Jenny noticed him looking and, without a word, set her fingers over one wrist and then the other as though to assure both of them that bone and flesh were all that remained beneath her hand.

"No wall," she said quietly. "No lock. No cell."

He nodded.

"Stoate's day now," he said.

"Yes," she answered. "And if there is any justice in New South Wales, it will be a short one."

The courthouse looked changed in daylight. Yesterday it had seemed to hold his life between its sandstone walls; now it was merely a building on a street where men unloaded trucks and bakers sold bread and traffic hissed past in the ordinary way of

town business. Yet when Bill mounted the steps with Jenny and the children beside him, he felt the same tightening in his chest. The body remembered what reason might deny.

The crowd was smaller. News had moved on, or pretended to. The back rows that had been full of union men, drifters, gossip-hunters, and district idlers during Bill's trial were half empty now. A few reporters sat ready with pads. Two state police officers kept the door. Donahue was there, freshly shaved and uneasy in a coat that sat on him like borrowed manners. Calthorpe had come up on the early bus and stood near the rail speaking with Biddulph, whose dark coat was as neat as if he had slept in it without creasing a cuff.

Bill took his place beside Jenny, not in the dock this time but on the free side of the rail, and the simple fact of that struck him harder than anything. He did not trust himself to speak.

When Stoate was brought in, the room altered.

For three months Bill had seen the man in memory as he had last stood at Tandara: hat tilted, chain bright across the waistcoat, small and venomous and full of borrowed authority. That figure had looked dangerous because he moved as if the world owed him an audience. The prisoner in the dock was different. He had no hat, no ornaments, no comrades packed behind him to nod at his every outrage. Without his stage properties he seemed meaner, barer, and to Bill's surprise, smaller. The dock had been built for men of weight and presence; Stoate stood in it as though the timber itself had judged him inadequate.

His eyes ran round the room until they struck Bill. He held the look only a second before turning away.

The Crown laid out the charges in a voice trained to make ruin sound tidy: the firing of the grass at Tandara, the theft of the cheque made out to William Hardwick, and the prisoner's arrest in the act, with evidence on his person and under his very feet. Then the witnesses were called, one after another, and the morning began to close over Stoate like water over a stone.

Sergeant Kennedy gave his evidence first. He was a careful man, not given to embroidery, and his very plainness did Stoate more harm than any flourish would have done. He described Macdonald's suspicion, the dry weather, the track turning off toward the sandhill, the black tracker calling out that he had seen the man stoop among the grass, the smoke rising in a narrow dark twist. He produced the brass match-box scratched with the prisoner's initials. He spoke of the half-burnt wax match and of the cheque taken from Stoate's pocket.

Biddulph, though he sat now with the composure of a spectator, had warned Bill the previous evening that the strongest evidence in any country court was often the evidence that sounded least theatrical. Jurymen distrusted a man who seemed determined to persuade them; they believed the witness who looked as if he would rather be elsewhere.

Kennedy would rather have been anywhere else.

Macdonald followed, huge and weather-dark, his contempt for Stoate so settled that it had gone beyond anger into something colder. He told the court of turning the agitator away when he

came begging rations after trying to wreck the shed, of Stoate's muttered threat to get square with him, of the ride out, the sight of the smoke, the almost disastrous dryness of the country, the cost that would have followed had the fire taken hold properly. As he spoke, Bill saw several of the jurors shift in their seats. Men who cared nothing for union quarrels could still understand the price of burnt feed.

Then came Daroolman, the tracker. He was not much at ease in court clothes, and the clerk had to repeat the oath, but once he began to speak he did so with quiet certainty. He had read the track off the road. He had seen where the man left it. He had seen the crouching shape at the grass. He had found the burnt match. He pointed once, without drama, at Stoate in the dock.

"That one," he said.

No barrister's speech could have landed half so hard.

The case for the Crown was almost indecently simple after that. The stolen cheque was passed up. Bill recognized the paper at once, though he had never held it in his hand. Fifty-five pounds and seventeen shillings—the amount he had sweated for at Tandara and dreamed of on the road back, already divided in his mind into fencing wire, seed, a payment toward Donahue's place, boots for Billy later on, things for the house Jenny never asked for and always somehow did without.

To see that cheque now, creased from another man's pocket, was to feel all over again the ugly intimacy of Stoate's malice. Not content with setting the law on him, he had stolen the labor of his hands as well.

When the judge asked whether the prisoner had questions for the witnesses, Stoate attempted his old style at first. He talked about class prejudice. He declared that station managers, police, and courts all served the same masters. He said men of property would swear anything to preserve privilege. But rhetoric sounded poor in a room where facts had been laid down one by one like fence posts in hard ground. The judge cut him short more than once. A jury that might have been impressed by fury the week before now looked only weary.

At length Stoate chose to make a statement. He said he had been on the ground merely to boil a billy. He suggested the cheque had been planted. He hinted that Hardwick, out of spite for union discipline, had connived with Macdonald to ruin him. This was the first time he named Bill directly.

Bill felt Jenny's hand close around his sleeve.

He kept his seat.

Biddulph leaned his head toward him and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Let him hang himself," he said.

And Stoate, with all the old vanity of a man who believed speech itself was power, did exactly that. He overreached. He contradicted Kennedy on one small point, then Daroolman on another, and in doing so revealed he remembered details he could not have known had he merely wandered innocently toward the sandhill. The jury noticed. Bill saw it happen: one man look up sharply, another frown, a third write something on the back of his handbill.

By noon the Crown had done. The judge's summing up was brief and dry. No one who heard it could have mistaken his view. The law, he said, did not concern itself with grand theories when a man was found in possession of stolen property and taken in circumstances consistent only with wilful destruction. Whatever grievances the prisoner might nurse against employers or institutions, they did not confer a right to theft or incendiarism. The jury's task was plain.

They were out hardly long enough for the court officer to refill the water jug.

Guilty.

The word did not ring. It settled.

Stoate gripped the rail. For an instant Bill thought the man might collapse, not from remorse but from the astonishment of finding that consequences existed after all. Then came the sentence. The judge delivered it in the same tone with which he might have ordered a clerk to amend a date: a term of imprisonment for the theft, a heavier one for the attempted burning of the grass, the latter to reflect the magnitude of the danger and the calculated nature of the act.

No one gasped. There was no thrill in it. The room had passed beyond excitement and into reckoning.

Stoate turned as the officers laid hands on him. Whether he meant to look for allies or witnesses Bill never knew. His gaze met Bill's once more, then slid to Jenny. If there was hatred there, it was smaller than before and lonelier. The dock door shut. He was gone.

Only then did Bill breathe properly.

Jenny let out a long breath at the same moment and sat back as if some invisible weight had at last been unhooked from between her shoulders. Billy, who had understood almost nothing of the proceedings and only that everyone he loved had been very grave for too long, leaned against his father's arm. Mary tugged the doll by its rag leg along the bench and declared she was hungry.

The ordinariness of the request nearly undid Jenny. She laughed once, abruptly, and pressed her hand to her mouth.

Outside, the noon sun lay hard on the courthouse steps. Wagga went on about its business. Men crossed the street carrying bales. A woman haggled over potatoes in front of the store. Somewhere nearby a blacksmith began striking iron in slow measured blows. There was no sign in the town's face that one man's life had been almost broken and another's villainy had at last come to account.

Biddulph joined them under the verandah, taking off his hat and wiping his brow with precise irritation.

"Well," he said, "that concludes Mr. Stoate's public usefulness for the present."

"I don't know how to thank you," Jenny said.

"By going home and making good use of the liberty we have preserved," he answered. "That will do for a start."

Calthorpe came down the steps a moment later with the look of a man privately delighted to have backed the right side. He

shook Bill's hand twice, as though once were not enough to establish the fact of him as a free client and neighbor.

"I said if Biddulph could not save you, no one could," he told Jenny. "Now, before either of you say anything heroic, let us settle practical matters."

Practical matters turned out to be exactly what Bill wanted. Accounts were opened on the hotel table in the dining room that afternoon. Biddulph's fees, witness expenses, travel, the boarding-house charges, the food, fuel, motel bills, and bus fares Jenny had paid while the case dragged through the assizes—everything was laid out with a pencil and folded papers and added twice to make sure. Bill looked at the figures with a tightening throat. Freedom was expensive. Justice, even when obtained, sent in its bill.

Jenny saw his face and gave him the look that meant she would not tolerate nonsense.

"We have the place," she said. "We have the cows. We have our hands. What else do people need?"

Calthorpe, hearing this, smiled behind his cup. "Mrs. Hardwick has the sounder banking principles of the two of you," he observed.

Bill admitted she had.

There remained one thing only that mattered more than the sums: getting home.

They left Wagga the next morning in a hired conveyance as far as they could manage before changing to their own means of travel. The first hours passed in a strange brightness. Bill sat

beside the driver with Billy jammed warm against him and watched the country unroll—bridges, flats, timber, the broad patient river bends—as though he were seeing New South Wales for the first time. To be moving by choice and not under escort was an astonishment. Even dust tasted different when it was not prison dust.

At halts along the road men recognized him here and there. Some had heard of the case; others only knew there had been trouble at Tandara and a hard-fisted delegate taken up later for arson. In the bush, stories travelled ahead of facts and still somehow reached their destination. Bill answered sparingly. Jenny answered not at all unless addressed directly, and then with a coolness that discouraged further curiosity.

They spent one night at a roadside house where the beds sagged and the stew was mostly onion, but Bill slept more deeply than he had since leaving Chidowla months before. He woke once in darkness, uncertain of where he was, and felt Jenny's shoulder against his arm and the small soft shape of Mary at the foot of the bed and knew himself anchored.

By the second afternoon the ranges began to rise in familiar forms. The road narrowed. Creeks cut across it in places the recent weather had not troubled to repair. Gum and ironbark closed over again. The smell of the country altered: less town dust, more damp fern in the gullies, more leaf mould, more smoke from scattered homesteads and camp fires.

Jenny, who had been sparing with words all day, said at last, "There."

Bill followed the line of her chin and saw, through a gap in the trees, the turnoff to Chidowla.

No triumph announced their arrival. No neighbors rode over. No fiddler struck up on the verandah. The gate sagged slightly on one hinge. The kitchen chimney wanted pointing. One stretch of the near fence had dropped and been patched in a way that told him Jenny must have managed it alone with whatever wire she had to hand. The house stood where it had always stood, low and weathered under the afternoon light, with the fowls pecking in the dust and the old cow bawling from the paddock because milking was later than she thought proper.

Bill climbed down before the cart had fully stopped.

He put both hands on the gatepost. The rough timber under his palms, the smell of dust and yard and stock, the slant of light across the doorstep—all of it came at him at once with such force that he had to stand still a moment before he could trust his legs.

Billy jumped from the cart and ran shouting toward the house as if it had been waiting specifically for him. Mary, passed down from Jenny's arms, stumbled after him and sat abruptly in the dirt, offended but unhurt. Jenny gathered the bags and looked at Bill.

"Well," she said. "Are you coming, or do you mean to stand there till dark admiring your own gatepost?"

He laughed then, and with the laugh something inside him came loose at last.

The first hours home were all labor. Animals do not postpone their needs because courts have been sitting. Water had to be drawn. The mare rubbed down. The children washed. Supper lit. Bill found himself grateful for the demands. Work returned a man to himself more reliably than reflection.

As dusk settled, Simon Muller rode over from his place, having seen the cart come in. He was a broad fair man with a face permanently pinked by weather and good humor, though tonight the humor was cautious until he had dismounted and shaken Bill's hand.

"Good to see you home," he said simply. "Karin sent bread."

Karin herself appeared not long afterward with a crock of stew and the kind of practical embrace she would have denied to anyone who commented on it. News, she told Jenny, had moved through every selector's kitchen within twenty miles. Some had feared the worst. Some had predicted it because people are cowards where another family's disaster is concerned. Some had been ready with sympathy the moment acquittal made sympathy safe.

Jenny listened without comment, only lifting one eyebrow at the proper points. Later, after the Mullers had gone and the children slept and the last plate was washed, she and Bill sat on the step outside the kitchen door while the frogs worked the creek and the stars came clear above the paddocks.

Bill said, "I was thinking of the cheque."

Jenny turned her head.

"What about it?"

"Had Stoate not taken it, we'd have had the money clear. Donahue might have sold before this. We might have had the place."

"He hasn't sold yet," she said. "And if he had, another fool would own it now and ruin it just as prettily. Land does not stop existing because one man has to wait."

He sat silent.

After a while she added, softer, "I know what you're grieving. But don't give that man more of your life than he already stole."

He looked out toward the dark line where the Donahue boundary ran.

"I meant to bring you back something better than debt and trouble."

"You brought yourself back," Jenny said. "That is not a small thing, Bill. And you've brought the children their father. If you think I count that lightly, you've forgotten the sort of woman you married."

He reached for her hand in the dark. She let him take it and leaned against his shoulder, not tenderly exactly but with the deep trust of one who had stood in the weather beside him and intended to go on doing so.

The next days proved what Wagga had only begun to show: acquittal did not erase consequence. There were debts to meet, small humiliations to absorb, practical deficiencies all over the place where one pair of hands had been forced to do the work of two. Jenny had managed heroically, but no holding of their size

could pass through three months of anxiety and broken routine without showing strain.

Bill mended the dropped fence first. Then the dairy gate. Then the leak at the shed roof. He cut wood, cleared the creek crossing, reset a broken paling near the garden, and in between did all the ordinary tasks that had piled up while he was absent. Each repaired thing gave him a satisfaction almost savage in its simplicity. Here was a rail. Here was a hinge. Here was an injustice the hands could answer.

People called. Some came from honest concern. Others came because curiosity in the bush is as natural as weather. Thornhill rode over one afternoon on the excuse of checking a beast gone astray and managed within ten minutes to speak of the assizes, the press reports, union mischief, the inadequacy of modern discipline, and the regrettable tendency of decent working men to get mixed up with the wrong associates. Bill, who had no patience left for such talk, answered so shortly that the man soon found a reason to remember another engagement.

Donahue arrived at dusk two days later, hat in hand and sobriety only partly secure. He had been useful at Wagga in his way, attending, testifying, showing his face where it counted, and Bill did not forget that. But the man looked at once more worn and more eager than before, like one who had seen trouble at close quarters and concluded it would be wiser to turn his own difficulties into cash before they turned him out altogether.

They spoke by the yard while Jenny listened unseen from the house.

"I'm thinking of letting the place go," Donahue said. "Bridget's for it. Says we've had enough of scraping."

Bill kept his face still.

"At what figure?"

The figure named was bad, but not impossible. Not if the season held. Not if Calthorpe remained friendly. Not if every plan they had sketched before the arrest could be resumed instead of abandoned.

"I can't move now," Bill said at last. "Not till the account recovers."

Donahue spat thoughtfully into the dust. "Reckoned as much. Still, I'd rather you had first say than some stranger from town who'll come up here with a drone and a consultant and tell me what my grass is worth from an office in Wagga."

Bill barked a laugh. "Then give me a little time."

"Time's what I have too much of and not enough money to fill it," Donahue replied. Yet he did not press.

After he rode off Jenny came out and stood beside Bill under the paling moon.

"Well?"

He told her the amount.

She was quiet a long minute, calculating in that swift hidden way of hers that made him think of abacus beads or ledger lines though she used neither when she could do the work in her head.

"Not impossible," she said at last.

"No."

"Only late."

"Yes."

She looked toward the dark of Donahue's block as if land itself could hear and be made to wait by force of will.

"Then we begin again," she said.

That was the phrase that stayed with him over the following weeks. Begin again. Not recover, not console, not lament. Begin. The spring moved on. Grass thickened where the weather allowed it. The children resumed their games with an elasticity adults could only envy. Billy turned the trial into some grand incoherent contest involving sticks, stones, and imaginary policemen who always lost in the final accounting. Mary followed him with stubborn devotion. Jenny set butter, churned, bartered, wrote letters, visited when visits were necessary, and ran the little world of the house and dairy with a sharpened determination Bill understood to be the truest consequence of what they had endured. She would not be caught helpless a second time.

At night, once the children were asleep, they talked over figures. Sometimes they spoke of buying the adjoining land; sometimes only of surviving the year respectably and reducing what had been spent in Wagga. They spoke of cattle, of sheep, of fencing, of whether another water line could be run before summer. Their marriage, which in the first days after his return had been held together chiefly by relief and fatigue, steadied itself again in these conversations. Plan by plan, they came back to one another.

Yet beneath all this ran another change less easy to name. Bill had seen the inside of law now. He had sat where accused men sat and understood how quickly a decent name could be dirtied if the wrong story took hold first. It made him slower to judge and less patient with those who judged too quickly. It also left him with a harder understanding of what must be defended. A man did not keep a place like Chidowla merely by loving it. He kept it by earning money, reading character, choosing allies carefully, and refusing, when the moment came, to be driven by louder men into ruin.

One evening, as they finished supper, Billy asked whether his father would go away shearing again.

Bill looked at Jenny before he answered.

"Yes," he said. "When the time comes."

Billy frowned. "What if another bad man is there?"

Jenny set down her fork.

"Then your father will know him sooner," she said.

Bill met her eyes across the table. There was no smile in what she said, but there was something better: confidence.

Late in the month, when the worst of the repairs were done and the account books no longer looked like a siege had passed through them, Bill and Jenny walked together up the rise beyond the house. The children had been left with Karin Muller. The evening was cool, the grass silvered by a moon not yet full. From that point they could see their own boundary, the line of creek, the dim suggestion of Donahue's land adjoining, and beyond all of

it the dark rolling country out of which both trouble and fortune might come.

Bill put his arm round Jenny's shoulders. She rested into it only a little, but enough.

"I keep thinking," he said, "how near it came."

"So do I," she answered.

"And yet here we are."

"Yes," she said. "Here we are."

They stood without speaking. The bush gave out its small night noises. Somewhere across the gully a dog barked once. A cool wind moved in the grass and was gone.

At length Jenny said, in that same practical tone with which she might have announced rain or the need to salt a hide, "Tomorrow we'll start on the back fence. And on Saturday you ride to see Calthorpe. We must know exactly what can be managed and when."

Bill laughed under his breath.

"You never stop, do you?"

"No," she said. "And neither do you. That is why we may yet have the life we meant to build."

He kissed her then, with the moonlight on the paddocks and the smell of grass rising cold around them, and in the kiss there was relief, gratitude, sorrow for what had been spent, and a deeper pledge than either of them would ever have spoken aloud. The law had taken its bite. Stoate had taken his. The district had looked on and made its own calculations. None of that altered the essential fact.

They were still standing.

And from that, Jenny believed, a clear start might still be made.

Chapter 6

A Clear Start

By the time the court was done with Janus Stoate, the room had already begun to forget him.

That, more than the sentence itself, struck Bill Hardwick hardest as he stood beside Jenny in the half-emptied courtroom at Wagga Wagga and watched the officers take Stoate away. The man had swollen so large in Bill's thoughts through the months behind him that it seemed impossible he should now be reduced to no more than a small, angry figure in a dock built for bigger men, then a pair of manacled wrists, then a door shutting on iron. Five years with hard labour, the judge had said in a tone so dry it might have been about weather or fencing wire or some other matter of ordinary administration. Then the law turned to its next business, and Stoate passed out of the world as suddenly as if a trapdoor had opened under him.

Bill stood still for a moment after the door had shut.

He was conscious of Jenny's hand around his, of Billy shifting restlessly against his leg, of Mary warm and heavy

against Jenny's shoulder, half asleep from the close heat of the room. He was conscious too of the strange looseness in his own body. For months he had lived as if there were always another blow coming—another accusation, another witness, another night inside stone walls with a warder's boots passing the cell door. Now the thing was ended and his body did not know at once what to do with freedom.

"That's done," he said.

Jenny looked at him with the direct steady gaze that had carried him through all the worst of it.

"That's done," she answered.

They left the courtroom together, not quickly, not with any theatrical hurry, but with the deliberate pace of people who meant to leave every shadow of the place behind them. Bill did not glance again at the dock. He had sat in it once. That was enough for any man's lifetime.

Outside, the morning had sharpened into clean spring light. The sandstone of the courthouse steps seemed less severe than it had the day before. Wagga Wagga itself had gone on with its own affairs while judgment fell: delivery trucks moved in the street, a baker's boy shouted from the corner, a woman with a basket under her arm stopped to look toward the courthouse and then thought better of it and kept walking. To everyone else in town it was another day. To Bill it was the first day that had felt wholly his in months.

Donahue came striding down the steps behind them, hat in hand and face flushed with satisfaction.

“Five years,” he said. “Five years with hard labour. By God, there’s justice in the world yet.”

“There is,” Bill said. “And I want no more of it than I have to.”

Jenny gave a quick breath that might have been the beginning of a laugh.

“We'll drive back,” she said. “We'll get home. We'll settle the cheque. And we'll start over.”

Bill looked at her. “You say that like it’s nothing.”

“It isn’t nothing. It’s work. Work I know how to do.”

That was Jenny to the life. Where another woman might have spoken of gratitude, relief, nerves, or prayer, Jenny named the practical shape of hope and was done with it.

Donahue's battered four-wheel-drive stood in the yard by the office, a jerry can strapped in the tray and red dust caked along the doors from the run in. Bill lifted Billy into the back seat first, then steadied Jenny with Mary in her arms. Donahue swung in beside them and shut the door gently, as if the family's presence had turned the ute into a chapel.

As the ute pulled away, Bill looked one last time through the side window at the courthouse and the town. He had come to Wagga under guard, had slept in a cell there, had stood trial there, had sat under the eyes of strangers while his whole life was weighed in public. He meant never to see it again except, perhaps, from a distance on some future road when it had ceased to matter.

The road out of town ran broad and flat at first, through country already warming beneath the day. The plains opened away on either side in their dusty spring colours, fences running long and straight, sheep lying in pale drifts under trees, bullock teams dragging wool toward the river. For a while no one inside the ute said much. Relief had its own silence.

At last Bill reached into the inside pocket of his coat and touched the cheque, folded and refolded until the paper had gone soft at the edges. Fifty-five pounds and seventeen shillings. He had dreamt of it in the cell as if it were a charm against ruin. Once he had it in hand again, it seemed less like money than proof that his life had not been wholly stolen.

“I want to cash it at once,” he said. “Soon as we get to town proper. I’ll buy Billy boots, and Mary something decent, and maybe a dress for you that isn’t made out of old curtains and argument.”

Jenny turned her head slowly and looked at him. “No.”

Bill had been married long enough to understand the force within that one word.

“No?”

“No. We travel back on what I brought down. Mr. Calthorpe has stood by us. We pay the bank what we owe, put the rest where it can do the greatest good, and then we see how many cows and how much wire and how much feed the balance will buy. I have not worked like a dog these three months to watch fifty-five pounds vanish into boots and vanity.”

Donahue looked from one to the other and wisely kept out of it.

Bill put up a hand in surrender. “I only thought—”

“I know what you thought,” Jenny said, more gently. “You thought you’d like to hand us all some immediate happiness because you’ve had none for too long. I don’t object to the feeling. I object to the arithmetic.”

That made Donahue bark with laughter, and after a second Bill laughed too. The children stirred, Billy blinking awake long enough to ask if they were home yet, then sliding back against Bill’s side and sleeping again.

The road climbed gradually toward the ranges. The broad plains gave way to broken ground and timber. Creeks flashed in the hollows. The air changed, cleaner and colder. Bill sat with his son warm against his ribs and watched the country rise to meet them. The farther they went from Wagga the less he felt the last months clinging to him. The stone walls of the jail, the stale smell of the cell, the sound of a key in a lock, the crowd’s murmur in court—all of it seemed to fall away mile by mile behind them.

When the first long blue line of the mountains opened ahead, Billy pushed up against the window and breathed on the glass.

“Are those ours?”

“Near enough,” Bill said.

“Can you see our house?”

“Not yet.”

Billy considered this gravely, as if the failure of visibility were some temporary deficiency in the mountain rather than distance, then nodded and accepted it.

By the time they reached Tumut it was night. Lamps showed in the inn windows and in the few shops still open. The cold in the air carried eucalyptus and woodsmoke. Bill climbed down stiff from the ute and turned at once when he heard an exclamation from the rail.

Biddy Donahue stood beside her tray-back ute with her jacket zipped wrong in haste and one hand to her mouth. She had driven in from the selection herself the moment word came that the coach was carrying them home. The sight of Bill standing there free, upright, no warder on either side of him, unmade her. She crossed the yard in a rush and caught Jenny in both arms so hard that Mary protested and began to cry.

“There now,” Biddy said, crying herself and laughing through it. “There now. Didn’t I say we’d get you back? Didn’t I say no jury worth feeding would do otherwise?”

Jenny held her close for a second longer than her usual restraint might once have permitted. Trouble had altered all of them.

Back at Chidowla they reached the cottage deep into the night. The lamp was burning low in the window. The yard smelt of damp earth, cow dung, and wood smoke—the honest smell of a place worked every day by the same hands. Bill stood for a moment with his swag over one shoulder and simply looked at the house. There was the patched roof he meant to mend before summer, the rails he

had cut himself, the little dairy shed leaning a trifle to the south, the dark shape of the yard beyond. No palace in Sydney or Melbourne could have touched him like that rough small house touched him then.

Inside, everything was at once familiar and changed. Jenny had kept the place exact in his absence, yet his eye went at once to every little sign of what those months had cost her: a chair mended with different twine than he would have used, a flour bin lower than he liked to see, Mary's cot moved nearer the stove because of the cold nights, the stack of account papers weighted with a jam jar full of screws. These were not dramatic signs. They were better than drama. They were evidence.

After the children had been put down and Donahue and Biddy had gone back at last to their own place, Bill and Jenny stood together on the verandah looking out over the dark paddock. Frogs sounded from the creek. Somewhere a horse knocked its hoof against a rail. The stars above the gums were hard and bright.

Bill leaned both hands on the top rail. "I left this place as if I'd be gone a season and come back richer. Instead I nearly lost the whole lot."

"You came back," Jenny said.

"With you carrying it on your back till I could."

"That was the arrangement whether either of us said it aloud or not."

He turned and looked at her. In the half-light her face seemed older than when he had gone and finer too, all the

unnecessary softness burned out of it by work and fear and determination.

“I was a fool,” he said. “About Stoate. About all of it.”

“Yes,” she said. “But not a complete fool, or you’d be there still.”

He laughed under his breath, and because it was the first true ease between them since before Tandara, the sound mattered.

The next morning began as mornings always did at Chidowla: before light, with cold water, fire coaxed from embers, cows bawling in the yard, and work waiting without sympathy. That, more than the court’s verdict, restored Bill to himself. By sunrise he had milk on his boots, a hammer in his hand, and a list in his head. Repair the southern fence. Check the water trough below the lower paddock. Count the calves. Bring in the rails left stacked by the shed. Speak to Donahue about the boundary line and whether it could be shifted cleaner if they worked the two places together.

Jenny watched him from the dairy door as he moved about the yard. The jail had thinned him, but work began putting him back together almost at once. He had always been easier in action than in thought.

A few days later a boy rode in from Talmorah with a note folded twice and sealed badly. It was from the bank. Mr. Calthorpe requested the pleasure of seeing Mr. and Mrs. Hardwick on Saturday if convenient, as there were matters touching their account and future prospects that could be discussed to mutual advantage.

Jenny read the note twice, then tucked it into her apron pocket and looked across at Bill, who was lifting a broken gate back onto its hinges.

“There,” she called. “I told you. The world isn’t ended.”

He set the gate upright and wiped his forearm across his face. “No. Just waiting for us to catch up.”

Saturday in Talmorah had the air of a district taking stock of itself. Teams stood outside the stores. Women moved from draper to grocer to baker with baskets on their arms and children in tow. Men who had ridden in for mail and tobacco and nails stood in loose knots in front of the hotel and gave one another the kind of news that passed equally for information and entertainment. Bill felt every eye on him as the spring cart rolled up outside the bank, but he found he could bear it better than he had expected. Acquittal had restored not only his standing but also the district’s appetite for his company.

Calthorpe received them in his office with uncommon warmth for a banker. He was not a sentimental man; that was one reason Jenny trusted him. But he had backed them when backing them carried risk, and now that risk had turned to vindication, which bankers enjoy in their own way as much as any other class of men.

“You have weathered it,” he said, motioning them to chairs. “Not many would have done so as cleanly.”

“Jenny weathered it,” Bill said.

Calthorpe’s mouth twitched. “Mrs. Hardwick undoubtedly did a great deal. Still, here you both are, and with the cheque recovered there is room to talk sensibly.”

That was all Jenny required. Within minutes she had the account papers open, the figures before her, and the future of Chidowla spoken of as if it were a structure already framed and only needing boards. More cows. Better dairy returns. Careful use of Donahue's adjoining selection if Dick would consent to a formal arrangement rather than half-promises over a fence rail. Improvements to water. Later, perhaps, a stronger move into stock if the season held.

Bill listened, saying little at first. The speed with which Jenny and Calthorpe moved from ordeal to planning impressed him more than either of them knew. Women and bankers, he thought, had this much in common: both disliked dead money and idle grief.

When they came out of the bank, Jenny was carrying herself with the contained force that meant she had solved a problem three steps ahead and was impatient for the world to catch up.

"What did he say at the end?" Bill asked. "About the district meeting?"

"He said there are people who want to show they stood by us."

Bill frowned. "Show who?"

"Everyone."

He discovered what she meant that afternoon.

The room behind the Teamsters' Arms had hosted weddings, funerals, election counts, police courts, recitations, and rows enough to supply a dozen districts. Bill had been in it before for ordinary enough purposes. He had never seen it packed as it was that day.

The whole district seemed gathered there. Thornhill at the head of the table, silver-haired and broad as ever, presided with the ease of a man born to the front of any room. Beside him were clergymen, storekeepers, neighbouring runholders, selectors, bank men, and farmers great and small. Along the walls stood teamsters, shearers, boundary riders, and men Bill knew only by sight from sale yards and roads. Women filled the benches at the back, Biddy among them, with Jenny seated almost hidden until Bill's eye found her.

The food on the trestles had been laid out with bush generosity—cold meats, sandwiches, cakes, biscuits, bottles lined up as if for a wedding. Bill would have fled if there had been any way to do it without walking straight through the wall.

Thornhill rose and rapped the table. The room quieted. He began to speak of neighbours, of justice, of the district's pride in one who had been tried and found clean, of the value of industrious conduct and the danger of agitators. It was a speech half public tribute and half gentle warning to every man in the room who might hereafter think politics nobler than wages honestly earned. Bill heard only parts of it. The fact of the thing overran the detail. These people—many of whom had not exchanged ten words with him in years—had chosen to make his trouble their own and his return an event.

When Thornhill named Jenny as the true anchor of the enterprise, someone from the rear cried that she was the real boss, and the laugh that went through the room loosened the knot in Bill's chest. He glanced toward the back and saw Jenny lower

her eyes and smile despite herself. That sight gave him more courage than all Thornhill’s rhetoric.

Then the chairman read the address. It was written on heavy paper and signed by principal residents of town and district, congratulating Bill and Jenny on their return, praising their upright conduct, expressing sympathy for their undeserved persecution, and noting that the evidence of neighbours had done much to establish Bill’s innocence. It was formal language, but under the form Bill heard the thing itself: We know you. We know what happened. We do not confuse you with it.

At the end Thornhill produced a leather purse and placed it in Bill’s hand.

The cash inside had a weight that made Bill's fingers close instinctively. He had held money before, of course, but never money given in that spirit. It was not charity. That would have been easier to refuse. It was something much more difficult: the district’s insistence that he belonged to it and that what had been done against him had in some degree been done against them all.

He was expected to speak.

Public speaking had never been among Bill’s gifts. He would rather dock sheep in a thunderstorm than address a crowded hall. Yet there he stood, the purse in one hand and a room full of faces turned toward him.

“I’m no hand at a speech,” he began, which produced a murmur of approval because it was plain truth. “As perhaps most of you know.”

That brought some laughter, and after that the words came easier. He spoke of the woolshed at Tandara, of how he had once thought the talkers in politics knew better than the workers, of how a man can learn the feel of iron on his wrists and not care to repeat the lesson. He said, to the delight of the room, that he wanted to hear no more union gas from sham-shearers so long as he lived. There was cheering at that. Then his tone changed, as it must. He looked down at the purse and then up again at the people before him.

"Jenny and I feel your kindness to the bottom of our hearts," he said. "And we'll remember it to our dying day."

The cheering that followed was so full and rough and human that for a second Bill could not see properly. He blinked hard and found Jenny through the blur. She had one hand over her mouth. Biddy had hold of her arm. Donahue stood near the wall like a man astonished to find himself in respectable company and deserving of it.

Later, after the healths had been drunk and the food attacked and the room broken into a dozen smaller conversations, Bill found himself standing beside Thornhill with a glass in hand and the great man speaking to him not as to a curiosity but as to an equal in labour if not in acreage.

"You've got a good wife," Thornhill said.

"I know it."

"Then listen to her."

Bill looked across the room where Jenny stood with Calthorpe and two of the women from town, discussing something with the

focused intensity she usually reserved for calving trouble and account books.

“That,” he said, “has been the making of me all along.”

He and Jenny drove home in the dark after the meeting with the children drowsing in the back seat. The purse of savings lay wrapped in a handkerchief under the seat. The address, carefully rolled, rested between them. The night smelt of dust and wattles and the faint dampness from the creek flats. Neither spoke for a long while. Tyres hummed over the road. Loose tools clicked softly in the tray. Somewhere in the dark a nightjar called.

At last Jenny said, “Well.”

“Well what?”

“Well, Mr. Hardwick of Chidowla Creek. You appear to have become a person of consequence.”

He gave a short laugh. “Only till the next scandal.”

“No,” she said. “That’s not it. They’ve taken you back. That matters.”

He knew she was right. In the bush a man did not live by law alone, nor by money alone. He lived by what the district believed of him when he was absent. Today had altered that belief in his favour more strongly than he could ever have done by argument.

When they reached the cottage, Bill lifted the sleeping children one by one and carried them inside. Then he came out again and stood with Jenny on the verandah looking over the dark line of the paddock and the fainter line beyond that which marked the Donahue boundary.

“There’s work enough for two lifetimes,” he said.

“Good,” Jenny answered. “Then we needn’t waste any on foolishness.”

He put an arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him, not softly exactly, but with trust. The district had given them back more than money and standing. It had given them room to begin again with less fear.

“A clear start,” Bill said.

Jenny looked out into the dark as if she could already see the fences not yet built, the cows not yet bought, the improved pasture, the stronger house, the future she meant to drag out of the ground by main force if necessary.

“Yes,” she said. “Now let us see what we can make of it.”

Chapter 7

Moonlight and Iron

A year changed a property more honestly than ten years changed a man. Bill Hardwick had learned that for himself at Chidowla.

The ring fence now ran clean along the ridges and creek flats in a line of ironbark posts and taut wire that had taken the better part of four seasons to complete. The old slab place had given way to a weatherboard cottage with a long verandah and an iron roof that flashed in the morning sun. Below the house, the dairy herd moved through the lower paddock in a red-brown drift of breath and muscle, twenty good Shorthorn cows on grass that, by luck and labor together, had held through winter. Beyond the home paddock, where Dick Donahue's neglected selection had once seemed a reproach to any neighbor forced to look at it, another chimney now sent up smoke. Two cottages. Two families. One enterprise.

Jenny and Biddy Donahue worked the morning milking side by side in the shed, their stools shifting, pails filling, their hands keeping time to the old country rhythm that no machine had

ever improved upon in Bill's opinion. He stood at the gate and counted cattle as they came through, not because Jenny needed him to do it, but because a man who had nearly lost everything once did not stop counting what was his merely because fortune had lately behaved itself.

Inside at breakfast Jenny opened the ledger.

The book was thick now, its ruled pages crowded with her narrow, exact hand. Loans, payments, dairy receipts, store bills, repairs, lease obligations, factory credits, seed, shoeing, salt, freight, drench, cloth, kerosene, children's shoes, and on the better pages, against all expectation and against the grain of the world, profit. She turned a few leaves, ran one finger down a column, and looked up with that expression Bill knew better than any weather sign.

"We need thirty more head," she said.

Bill stopped with his spoon halfway to his mouth. Billy, intent on his porridge, did not look up. Mary held a rag doll by one sewn-on arm and watched her mother with grave concentration.

"Milkers?" Bill asked.

"Milkers or beef cattle. Sound cattle. It hardly matters, so long as we can carry them. Thirty head, and we ease the pressure on every line in this book. Thirty head, and we're not forever one sickness, one dry month, or one late payment from trouble."

"We haven't the money."

"No," Jenny said. "We haven't."

She closed the ledger and set her hand over it as if by contact alone she could force another line of figures to appear.

Bill knew better than to offer comfort where arithmetic was concerned. Jenny did not want comfort. She wanted a way through.

That way arrived before noon in a cloud of dust and horse sweat.

Dick Donahue came in from Tumut at a hard pace, slid from the saddle with the brightness of a man who had either found gold or mistaken danger for opportunity, and strode straight onto the verandah before the horse had quite finished blowing.

"I've got them," he announced.

Jenny stood in the kitchen doorway drying her hands. "You've got what?"

"Cattle. Fifty, maybe more. Wild cattle out on Thornhill's back country, feeding in the Wilgah scrub and out over the Macquarie flat at night. Thornhill can't catch them, can't spare the men, and is sick of hearing every drover in the district remind him they're there. He'll sell us all we can take at two pounds a head."

Bill stared at him. Jenny did not bother to pretend delight.

"Wild cattle," she said. "At two pounds a head. Which means someone else has already paid dearly for them."

Dick, undiscouraged, swept off his hat and fanned himself with it. "That is why this is our chance. They're fat, Jenny. Coarse perhaps, rough in the bone perhaps, but fat. Some bullocks worth five or six pounds in any decent market, and cows enough to give you the increase you want. Thornhill's men say the beasts live in the scrub by day and come out onto the plain to feed

after dark. They scatter if ridden by daylight. But there is one way to take them."

Bill was already hearing the shape of it before Dick said the words.

"We moonlight them."

Jenny looked from one man to the other and found no sense in either face. "You propose to buy trouble in the dark."

"We propose," Bill said slowly, "to buy cattle cheaply if the risk can be managed."

Dick leaned forward. "I've spoken to Gundai already. And Johnny Smoker. Thornhill swears by both. They know where the mob comes out and how it feeds. Charlie Dickson will come if we ask him. Ross and Webb from Thornhill's boundary huts too. A handful of good riders, one full moon, one receiving paddock ready, and we can do in a night what a dozen men couldn't do in a month by daylight."

Jenny folded her arms. Bill could almost hear the figures moving in her head, turning risk into columns. Fifty cattle at two pounds. Market value. Breeding value. Loan pressure. Fence lines. Grass carrying capacity. A new herd on Chidowla ground. At last she said, "If Thornhill sees how eager you are, he'll ask three pounds a head."

Dick laughed. "Then I'll try to look miserable when I shake his hand."

"You will fail," she said. "But try."

For the next three days the district became a map of errands and quiet commitments. Bill rode out from selection to selection

and found the men he wanted. Charlie Dickson came in at once, saying only that he had not been on a proper night muster in too long. Ross considered and then agreed. Webb said yes before the offer was finished. Young Callahan, raw-boned and keen, accepted so quickly that Bill wondered whether he had heard a single practical word beyond cattle and moonlight. At the edge of the Wilgah country, Gundai and Dick followed tracks across soft ground and found where the mob came out to feed. The signs were plain to Gundai in a way they could never have been to Bill: the deep-cut marks of heavy bullocks, the lighter prints of cows with calves, the regular line of movement from the scrub to the plain and back again before first light.

"One chance," Gundai said, looking over the moon-silvered flat on the scouting ride. "Get behind them proper, keep the scrub on the left, and push north. If they turn for timber, they are gone."

"Then we won't let them turn," Dick answered, though Bill trusted Gundai's tone more than Dick's confidence.

On the afternoon of the full moon they made camp in a stand of red gum close enough to the Macquarie flat for a quick ride and far enough from the open ground not to carry scent or sound. The camp was simple: two canvas flies, a fire ring, saddles under trees, bridles hanging from limbs, hobbled horses moving like patient shadows among the grass. One by one the men came in. Dick. Charlie. Ross and Webb. Callahan, unable to sit still even after unsaddling. Then Johnny Smoker and Gundai out of the scrub

itself, appearing so quietly that Callahan jumped and tried to laugh at his own nerves.

Bill laid out the plan before the light failed. They would saddle at nine. No talking once mounted. No whips unless absolutely needed. Johnny would lead them to the south edge of the plain. Gundai and Charlie would help turn the rear of the mob. Ross and Webb would hold the left flank, Callahan and Dick the right. Bill would ride the center and shift as needed. If any beast broke badly, one man only would go after it. Nobody would plunge blind into the Wilgah in full excitement and lose both horse and cattle together.

By dark the air had sharpened and the world narrowed to the fire, the men around it, and the black timber just beyond. Tea went round. Damper. A little cold meat. The talk, as it will with working men waiting on hard business, began in jokes and drifted toward old stories. Charlie told of a brumby muster spoiled by a wombat. Ross said the country always saved its stupidest tricks for a man with the most to lose. Callahan asked too many questions, all of which the older men answered with the tolerant contempt reserved for youth. Johnny Smoker sat with his back to a red gum and spoke almost not at all. Gundai sharpened a knife on a flat stone with a sound like quiet metal rain.

Then another rider came in through the dark.

He led a tall bay with the worn look of a horse borrowed from a man better off than its current rider. The man himself was lean, gray at the temples, and so self-contained that the firelight seemed not to touch him fully. Harry Bower. Bill knew

the name at once. A man from old station talk and scattered district mention. One of those figures who seemed always to have once been somewhere else.

"Heard you might want another rider," Bower said.

Bill looked at him, at the horse, at the face lined by weather and some harsher thing than weather. "We can use one."

Bower took tea, saddled down, and sat a little apart, which suited everyone. Later, when Callahan nervously asked whether this country had ever seen bushrangers, Bower answered in the tone of a man laying a card on the table and told them the Peechelbah story: Morgan held in a station house, the manager mustering men by cunning instead of noise, the long night, the wait, the shot that finished it. He told it slowly, with no ornament beyond the shape of the facts. When he finished, the fire had burned low and no one felt much like talking afterward.

At nine they saddled.

The horses knew from the handling what sort of work it was to be. Leather creaked softly. Bits clicked. Girths were pulled firm. Gundai spoke low to his chestnut in a language older than fences. Johnny checked the moon's place behind the trees and nodded once. Bill mounted and raised a hand. The little camp fell behind them.

They went first through timber, single file, under branches that shut out the stars, the horses stepping carefully through bark and leaf litter. Then the trees thinned. The world opened. Before them lay the Macquarie flat, vast and almost luminous even before the moon cleared the timber line. The grass stood knee-

high and still. The Wilgah scrub made a black wall beyond. Above, the sky stretched so wide and bright with stars that the earth below seemed not so much dark as waiting.

Johnny led them south along the timber edge. Then the line widened. Twenty yards between riders. Thirty. Fifty. A crescent taking shape around emptiness that was not empty at all.

Bill saw the cattle first as movement. Then as darker shapes against dark grass. Then the moon lifted, large and pale gold over the trees, and there they were: scores of them, feeding quietly in open country, heavy-bodied and unsuspecting. Brindled cattle, red cattle, roans, a gray-faced bullock broad through the shoulder as any beast Bill had ever seen, cows with calves, outlaw stock that had learned to trust distance and scrub.

Bill passed the signal. The line widened further. Johnny and Gundai worked out on the far side with exquisite patience. Charlie drifted inward by degrees. Dick on the right looked, for once, less like an enthusiast than a stockman. The ring closed. The cattle did not know yet that they were gathered.

"Now," Bill said softly.

Pressure from behind. No shout. No crack of whip. Only the presence of horsemen shaping motion. One cow lifted her head and walked. Another turned. The movement spread through the mob with the logic of water following slope. Soon the whole body of cattle was drifting north, out across the moonlit plain toward the receiving paddock three miles away.

For the first mile Bill thought they might do it almost too easily. The sounds were uncanny in their gentleness: the low pad-

thud of hooves in grass, the breath of cattle, a calf calling once, leather murmuring on moving horses. The men rode spaced and quiet. Even Dick kept his seat and his temper. Bill counted as they went and made it fifty-three.

Then the great gray-faced bullock at the head of the mob stopped.

It lifted its head, tested the air, and turned with the sudden violence of a beast remembering itself. In one motion it crashed back through the mob, scattering cattle and nearly taking Callahan's horse off its feet.

"Hold the line!" Bill shouted. "Dick, take him!"

Dick was gone before the last word left Bill's mouth. His stock horse leaped into the run, closing fast on the bullock. Moonlight flashed on the lifted stockwhip. Dick rode up broadside, jammed his horse against the beast's shoulder, and laid the whip across its face in three quick reports that cracked over the plain like rifle fire. The bullock swerved, rage and surprise warring in it. Dick drove again, horse against flank, whip again at nose and horn, and the huge beast, robbed of both momentum and certainty, turned back into the tail of the mob and dropped at last to a resentful walk.

"That was close," Webb muttered.

"Closer if he'd missed," Charlie said.

They tightened the ring and pushed on. For another quarter mile all went well. Then a brindled leader at the front—the kind of beast that had spoiled more than one daylight muster—wheeled and came back. Charlie went after it on the old horse he trusted

for hard turns. He did not try persuasion. The whip cracked and fell, once, twice, again, the old gelding reading the bullock's feints before they happened. The brindle charged the horse, was turned, charged again, was turned again, and at last gave way under force, pain, and the hard pressure of a stock horse that knew its craft. It ran back in among the others and stayed.

Bill felt the strain tightening then in every animal, horse and cattle alike. They were close enough now to smell timber and fence, close enough for the mob to sense change without understanding it. The men drew nearer. The whips began to hiss through grass as warning. The cattle picked up from a walk to a broken trot.

Then the left side broke.

A long-horned brindled cow tore for the timber and ten or fifteen head went with her, dark bodies pouring off in a rush toward the Wilgah. Bill had only time to shout one name.

"Bower!"

Harry Bower moved as if he had been waiting for precisely that order all his life. One moment he was a quiet shape on the outer wing; the next he and the borrowed bay were all speed and violence, plunging after the breakaway through brush so thick that Bill winced to hear it struck. Branches snapped. Hooves hammered deadwood. Then the stockwhip began, not frantic but measured, each crack placed where it would do most to turn panic into pain and pain into direction. For a few seconds Bill could not see horse or rider. Then the breakaway burst back from the scrub, Bower behind and alongside them, face scored by a branch,

hat gone, driving the cattle toward the main mob with terrible composure.

When he rejoined the line Dick breathed, "That is riding."

Bower said nothing.

The paddock gate was ahead now, a rectangular darkness in pale rails. Johnny Smoker rode on and swung it wide. The leaders balked. Bill felt the whole night balancing on the hesitation of those first beasts. Then the gray-faced bullock—the same brute that had nearly ruined them—walked through the opening with the heavy submission of an animal too tired or too bewildered to resist further. Once he went, the others followed in a rush. Cows. Calves. Bullocks. The whole wild mob poured through. Johnny dropped the rails in place behind the last beast and chained the gate.

Fifty-three head.

For a moment no one spoke. Horses stood wide-legged and blowing. Men bent over saddles with the delayed weakness that comes after danger passes. Inside the paddock the cattle milled, bellowed, and at last began to settle in knots.

Dick punched the air. "Fifty-three, by God."

"We'll count them again by daylight," Bill said, though he was grinning too.

The count held in daylight. So did the value.

At Thornhill's yards the mob looked wilder than it had in the moonlight. Day showed whites of eyes, smashed rails if a man came too near, the true insolence of scrub-bred cattle. Thornhill

himself drove over to see them and stood at the top rail shaking his head in satisfaction.

"Fifty-three in one night," he said. "My own hands couldn't do it in a month."

He wrote the credit at once. Two pounds a head, as agreed. One hundred and six pounds through Calthorpe's bank. Advice came with it, freely given: blind the worst of the outlaws with greenhide flaps and they would settle; draft the bullocks for sale; keep the better cows; breed them forward. Thornhill made special mention of Johnny Smoker and Gundai, not as a favor but as fact. The best stock-riders on the river, he said, and no sensible man disputed it.

The mood after that was too loose for immediate departure. There was drafting to finish, a little rough celebration, tea under a red gum, and men replaying their own best moments with the generous inaccuracy that follows success. Callahan wanted rough-riding contests. Dick encouraged him until Jenny's future voice somehow sounded in Bill's ear and he steered the gathering back toward useful labor. By noon the bullocks were separated, the roughest leaders prepared for blinding, and the cows grouped for the drive home.

Bill and Dick took the mob out the next morning with a handful of quiet station cattle in among them to serve as leaders. It was astonishing how quickly wildness could be confused by company and circumstance. The great gray-faced bullock, greenhide hanging over his face so that he could see only from the corners of his eyes, bumped a stump and afterward

followed whatever moved ahead of him. The brindled leader did the same. What had been terror in the Wilgah became bewildered obedience on the road.

They camped the first night by a creek bend. Bill took first watch and rode slowly around the resting cattle while Dick slept rolled in a blanket near the coals. It was a cold, clean night. The mob breathed heavily in the dark. Somewhere water moved over stones. Bill found himself thinking not of cattle but of Bower's story and of the country itself, how thin the line was here between labor and violence, law and outlawry, family enterprise and desperate improvisation. The station manager at Peechelbah had hidden money under a tree root, gathered uncertain men, and waited in darkness for one shot to decide the matter. Bill had spent the last year building fences and dairy returns and still found himself riding wild stock by moonlight under a sky so old and vast it made every plan seem temporary.

By the second afternoon the ranges of the Chidowla country appeared ahead. The smell changed. The shape of the ridges grew familiar. They forded the creek below the house and brought the mob through the gate of the new paddock where grass stood ready and water lay in the dam. Dick swung the gate behind the last animal and laughed aloud.

"We're home."

Jenny came down to the stockyards to inspect what moonlight and risk had bought her. She did not praise at once. She walked the rail. Looked at mouths, shoulders, hips, calves, temper. Assessed bone and condition with a severity that made Dick

nervous enough to over-explain. At last she stopped beside the gray-faced bullock, now humbled into docility by greenhide and fatigue, and let the silence work upon both men.

"They're rough," she said. "That brindled cow has the face of a villain, and half those bullocks look as if they were bred by argument rather than design."

Bill waited.

"But they're sound. The bullocks will sell. The cows will breed. In two years the herd doubles if we're sensible. In five, we're in a different class altogether."

Dick let out a breath. Bill smiled.

"Then they'll do?" he asked.

"They'll do," Jenny said. "And if you ever again take it into your head to ride after fifty head of wild cattle in the dark without coming home with them, I shall object much more severely."

That night, after the children were in bed and the house had gone quiet, Bill and Jenny sat on the verandah with the lower paddock spread below them and the new mob settling under moonlight. Jenny sewed a torn shoulder seam in one of Billy's shirts. Bill smoked. From the dark came the occasional low bellow of the cattle finding their water and their fences. It was not a sound Chidowla had known before. Already it felt as if it belonged there.

Bill told her more fully about the camp, about Bower, about the Peechelbah story and Morgan's death. Jenny listened with her work in her lap.

"It's a strange country," she said when he finished. "Bushrangers and butter factories. Wild cattle and dairy cows. Men talk as if the old violence is over, but all it really did was change clothes."

"Not us," Bill said. "We're just farmers."

Jenny turned her head and looked at him in the lamplight.

"You were a prisoner six months ago for a crime you didn't commit, William Hardwick. Tonight you rode home with fifty-three head of scrub cattle after buying them in moonlight like a man out of bad legend. Don't oversimplify yourself."

He laughed softly.

"I told Bower there's work here if he wants it. Fencing, boundary riding. He'd be useful."

Jenny threaded her needle again without looking down. "If he comes, he comes. We will treat him fairly and see what he is made of."

"And if he isn't made of much?"

"This country will tell us. It tells on everybody in the end."

Below them the cattle shifted in the paddock, dark shapes on silver grass. Beyond, the fence lines ran straight over ground that a year earlier had seemed all burden and uncertainty. Bill looked out over it all—the dairy herd, the new mob, the Donahue cottage, the creek line, the verandah where his wife sat sewing by lamplight—and felt what he had not permitted himself to feel earlier in the day while the work was still before him.

Not safety. That was too large a word and too fragile a thing. But momentum, perhaps. Purchase. The sense that labor, if applied stubbornly enough and directed by a mind like Jenny's, might yet turn chance into structure.

Jenny tied off the thread and bit it clean.

"We need a fencer," she said.

Bill looked at her. "That is your conclusion from all this?"

"It is one of them. Your posts are straight, but you are slow, and Dick Donahue would rather ride a horse than dig a hole. If Harry Bower wants work, there is work."

Bill leaned back and let the pipe smoke rise into the cold, sweet air.

"You're a hard woman, Jenny Hardwick."

"I'm a practical woman," she said, picking up the shirt again, "married to a man who thinks riding after wild cattle by moonlight makes him ordinary."

He looked out at the paddock once more. The moon had risen higher now, whitening the rails and silvering the backs of the cattle. Chidowla was no longer merely the place where they had begun. It was becoming, line by line and risk by risk, the place from which a future might actually be argued.

And below the verandah, in the grass of the lower paddock, the wild cattle chewed and settled as if they had belonged there all along.

Chapter 8

The Country Itself

Two years after the trial, Chidowla no longer looked like a place that might at any moment be swallowed by debt, drought, or bad luck. At dawn it looked like work turned into shape.

The ring fence ran unbroken across the ridges and down through the flats, ironbark posts and wire catching the first silver of the morning. Below the weatherboard cottage the dairy herd moved through the mist in red-brown clusters, their breath rising white in the cold. A second dam held the early light. The cheese shed stood beside the milking shed under its own roof, and beyond that were four men's huts, smoke already lifting from the stove pipe of the nearest one. The road to Talmorah had been graded the previous spring. A council truck came through after heavy rain now, though not always quickly enough to satisfy Jenny.

The country itself had not softened. The mornings still bit at the hands. The creek still ran lean in bad months and full in good. Foxes still took fowls if the wire was slack, and cattle still found weaknesses in any fence not watched. But the place

had changed in the way a marriage changes if it survives long enough to be tested: not prettier, exactly, but stronger in the joints.

Jenny Hardwick was in the milking shed before sunrise, working beside Biddy Donahue with her sleeves rolled and a pencil tucked behind one ear. The scale of the work would have astonished the woman she had been three years before. Then she had kept a single pail and a single ledger and counted every shilling twice. Now eight cows stood in the bails at once, and four hired men worked the other side of the shed while the stainless lines hissed and the collection cans filled.

Still, the rhythm was not so different from the old days. Pull, strip, release. Move the stool. Shift the pail. Check the udder. Mark the yield.

“That red cow’s off again,” Biddy said.

Jenny did not look up from the tags clipped to the rail. “She’ll calve in three weeks. It’s in the book.”

“You’ve got everything in the book.”

“Someone has to.”

Biddy laughed, the same broad, rolling laugh she had brought with her through pregnancies, shortages, Dick’s schemes, and a dozen small disasters of station life. Jenny moved to the next cow, set the stool without spilling a drop, and checked the digital milk meter at the bail more from habit than necessity. The numbers mattered, but what mattered more was whether a woman could look at a cow and know what she had left in her. Jenny could.

She had grown leaner in two years and harder in the jaw. The lines around her mouth were deeper, not from unhappiness but from the effort of making decisions all day and being right often enough that people had stopped questioning her just for the pleasure of it. Her hands were rough from cold water and detergent and fencing wire. She no longer minded. Nothing in her life that mattered had come to her by softness.

Outside, the stockyard gate banged once, and she knew without turning that Bill was drafting cattle.

She finished her row, washed her hands at the tap, and crossed to the yards with the ledger under one arm.

Bill stood at the race gate in his old felt hat and work shirt, directing cattle through with the easy patience that had become one of his chief strengths. Dick Donahue rode behind the mob on a bay gelding, all restless encouragement and profanity. The beast Bill let through to the market yard he let through with a flick of the lever that seemed almost casual; the one he kept back he kept back with the same economy of motion. He read cattle the way Jenny read figures. Bone, condition, temperament, trouble. It was all there if a man would look.

“Twenty-six for market,” Jenny said, pencil moving over the page. “Four more and you’ve got your thirty.”

Bill glanced toward her but kept his eyes mostly on the race. “The bay cow sound?”

“She’s in calf. Leave her.”

“The blue roan?”

“He’ll kick a farrier through a wall. Sell him.”

Bill grinned and swung the gate. The blue roan bullock went into the market yard with a toss of the horns and a bad temper that made Dick laugh aloud.

By the time they had the thirty head sorted, the sun had cleared the ridge. The cold burned away fast. Dust lifted from the yard. In the house, Mary was singing to herself in the off-key, solemn way of small children. Billy had been seen half an hour earlier conducting a campaign against imaginary enemies with a stock whip handle and a saucepan lid.

Jenny shut the ledger. “If the market holds, they’ll bring enough.”

“Enough for what?” Bill asked, though he knew exactly what she meant.

“For the next thing.”

With Jenny there was always a next thing. Another paddock. A better separator. A different breed bull. An arrangement with the processor in town. Solar on the dairy roof. A better school option for Billy when the time came. She did not spend money in her mind; she placed it.

Harry Bower was in the lean-to by the dairy shed mending harness when Billy came around the corner and squatted beside him.

“What are you fixing?”

“Harness.”

“Can I watch?”

“You can watch if you’re quiet.”

Bower said almost everything in that same dry, unadorned tone, as if speech were a duty best discharged with efficiency. He was older now, thinner than when Bill first knew him, more deeply cut about the eyes. He owned almost nothing and kept what he owned in perfect order. His blanket was folded exactly, his tin plate cleaned to brightness, his tobacco pouch hung always from the same nail.

Billy watched the needle pass through the leather.

“Were you ever a soldier?”

“No.”

“A bushranger?”

Bower’s hands paused for so slight a moment most men would have missed it.

“No.”

“Johnno says you shot people.”

“Johnno talks too much.”

Billy considered this gravely. “What were you, then?”

Bower bit off the thread, tested the stitch with his thumbnail, and hung the repaired strap on a peg.

“A stockman. Same as now.”

Then he lit his pipe and sent the boy back to help his mother. There was affection in it, though he never would have called it that.

Inside the kitchen, Jenny packed Bill’s saddlebag with the efficiency of a field quartermaster. Salt beef wrapped in paper, fresh bread in a cloth bag, tea, sugar, pain relief for the mare’s shoulder, a phone charger, a power bank, a bundle of

receipts to be dropped at the accountant's office in Tumut, and finally a folded shopping list written in her precise hand.

"Calico," she said. "The good kind, not the flimsy rubbish. Lamp oil for the emergency lamps, even though you'll tell me the battery lanterns are enough. Buttons. Pins. Thread, number forty. And a slate pencil for Billy because he has worn his down to a nub though heaven knows how."

Bill slid the list into his shirt pocket.

Then she handed him an envelope.

It was addressed to R. Calthorpe at the Bank of New South Wales branch in Talmorah, though the modern bank behind the old name was a regional office now merged into something larger and uglier in Sydney. The old brass plaque remained at the branch, and Calthorpe remained behind the desk, which was reason enough for Jenny to continue using the title.

"What's this?" Bill asked.

"Post it in Tumut."

"What's in it?"

"Business."

"What kind of business?"

"The kind I'll tell you about when it's settled."

He looked at her over the envelope. She met his eyes squarely. Bill knew that look. It meant she had already thought the thing through six ways and would not be hurried by curiosity, affection, or masculine vanity.

"All right," he said.

"You trust me?"

“I married you, didn’t I?”

“That isn’t always evidence of good judgement.”

He smiled and tucked the envelope away.

When the children were gathered at the bedroom door for farewell, Billy asked to go on the drive, Mary demanded to be lifted, and Jenny instructed Bill to write from Tumut, not merely send some useless one-line text from the highway at eleven o’clock at night. Bill promised. She informed him that Dick was not to be allowed to sell under the figure she had set. He informed her Dick knew his trade. She replied that Dick knew many things, but discipline was not among them.

At the gate, Bill mounted up with Dick, Callahan, and young Tom behind him. The thirty head stood in the road beyond, shifting and blowing steam in the cold air. Jenny waited at the cottage gate with Mary on one hip and Billy hopping from foot to foot beside her. Bower leaned against the dairy doorway and watched with his pipe in his hand.

Bill lifted one hand. Jenny raised hers once in reply and let it drop. There was no theatricality in either of them. The years had stripped such things away. But as he turned onto the road and the cattle began to move, he looked back from the ridge and saw her still standing there in the morning light, straight as a fence post, not watching him now but already turning toward the next work of the day.

The drove moved south through the district in the crisp light of late autumn. Without the noise and emergency of shearing season, road work had its own peace. The cattle found their

rhythm. Hooves thudded softly on the road. Leather creaked. Bits jingled. On the flanks, Callahan rode with the quiet competence he had acquired over two seasons of hard work, while Tom still sat too stiffly and held his horse too tightly. Bill corrected him once, gently. By noon the boy was learning.

The country changed as they rode. Around Chidowla the paddocks still held a little green, but farther out the grass had turned gold and silver, and the creeks ran narrower under the willows. Bill read the season in everything he passed: the early drying along the ridges, the level of the crossings, the dusty bloom on the roadside scrub. Dick said he worried too much. Bill said someone had to.

That first night they camped by a waterhole where the road bent around a creek flat. The cattle watered and settled. The horses were hobbled and rubbed down. Dick built the fire with his usual skill, fast and neat, and before long the four men sat around it eating cold beef and bread in the dark while the stars came out one by one.

It was there that Callahan told Tom the horse story.

He had heard it, he said, from an old station cook who had once watched a man ruin half a dozen lives for the sake of a mare hardly worth stealing. Tom listened with the rigid stillness of youth confronted by consequence. The story itself was simple enough at first: a horse taken in a moment of stupidity, sold on, discovered later. But Callahan followed the line of damage where it went—arrest, prison, an escape attempt, a dead warder, a dead innkeeper, a dead fugitive, a dead accomplice, and finally the

traitor who took the reward money and drank himself into the grave.

"Five men gone," Callahan said quietly. "For a horse worth maybe two thousand dollars in today's money, if that. That's how the price comes due. Never at the start. Always later."

The fire cracked. Somewhere beyond the ring of light a fox barked along the creek bank. Tom stared at the flames.

Bill said, "That's the lesson. The thing you take looks small. The chain that follows it never is."

He did not mention his own trial. He did not need to. Dick met his eyes across the fire and looked away again.

The second evening they camped at Pine Ridge Billabong under dark pines where the silence seemed too deep to be harmless. A mail contractor came in after dusk on a sweating horse with another behind carrying locked satchels and parcels. Even in 2026 there were still places where paper moved more reliably by man and horse than by internet signal. His name was Dan McElroy. He took the tea Bill offered and, after a while, told them why he never willingly camped at Pine Ridge if he could help it.

It was an old bush story, but not the sort men told for ornament. Drought years. Frost. A midnight arrival at a lonely billabong. A man too cold and too tired to trust his own senses. Dan had seen—or believed he had seen—something moving among the pines that no rider wished to meet alone. He told it flatly, with none of the relish of a born storyteller, and the lack of performance made it worse. Even Dick, who could laugh at most things, kept his eyes on the fire while Dan spoke.

Before dawn the mailman rode out again, swallowed by the dark and the road.

By midmorning the next day they had reached Tumut.

Sale day made the town feel twice its usual size. Utes and horse floats crowded the streets near the yards. Agents moved with tablets and paper notebooks both, unwilling to trust entirely to either. Buyers from the processors and supermarket supply chains stood at the rails in clean shirts and RM Williams boots, pretending no one could see how badly they wanted good cattle. Dogs barked. Yardmen shouted. The air smelled of dust, dung, hot coffee, and money.

Bill and Dick put their thirty head into the selling pen. The blue roan bullock tested the rails and got a smart correction from a yard hand. Callahan led the horses to the shade. Tom stood very straight and said little, trying to appear older than he was.

Dick made his rounds at once, talking to agents, reading the yard, measuring the competition. He had, for all his many faults, a natural dealer’s gift. Bill trusted him within limits, and on sale day that was enough.

When the auctioneer called up Lot Fourteen—thirty head, Hardwick and Donahue, Chidowla—Bill leaned on the rail and watched the bidding climb. Four and a half. Four-eight. Five. Five-ten. Five-fifteen. It stuck there for one fraught second and then sold.

Dick turned with satisfaction bright in his eyes. “Best price on the ground.”

Bill permitted himself only a small smile, but in his chest something loosened. Five-fifteen a head put the trip well beyond worth doing. Jenny had said not under four. Jenny, as usual, had been conservative in public and ambitious in private.

At the sale office the agent arranged the figures on a screen, printed the transaction summary, and offered a same-day transfer if Bill wanted it. Bill chose transfer for the bulk and took a smaller cheque as well because experience had taught him that systems failed at the exact moment one most wished them not to. Two pieces of paper sat in his shirt pocket after that: the outgoing letter for Calthorpe, and the paper record of what the cattle had fetched.

He crossed to the post office after lunch to send Jenny's envelope and there, to his surprise, the postmaster stopped him before he could leave.

"There's something for your household," the man said, rummaging in a pigeonhole more from habit than necessity in this age of barcode scanners and parcel apps. "Forwarded from Talmorah."

He handed over an official envelope bearing the crest of the Department of Lands and Regional Development. Bill turned it over once in his hand. It was addressed to Mrs. J. Hardwick.

Outside in the sunlight he broke the seal.

The language was bureaucratic, but the meaning arrived clear enough: approval had been granted for the conditional purchase of six hundred and forty acres of adjoining Crown land above the

creek, subject to the usual requirements for access, fencing, and improvement.

Jenny had done it.

She had done it without telling him because she had wanted certainty first and because, if she was honest, she preferred triumph to consultation when the matter concerned land.

Bill read the letter twice, then put it in his pocket beside the sale papers.

At supper in the Tumut hotel dining room, Dick laughed aloud when he understood what the letter meant.

“She’s bought the back country.”

“Looks that way.”

“She never said anything?”

“Not to me.”

Dick shook his head in admiration. “Bill, I hope you know your wife is the most dangerous person in the district.”

Bill did know. He knew it in the way a man knows the strength of a river because he has crossed it in flood. Jenny did not waste motion. She did not boast. She watched, calculated, waited, and then acted so decisively that afterward everyone else had the impression events must always have been moving that way.

They were finishing their meal when a knot of younger shearers at the bar grew loud enough to carry into the dining room. Union rates. Solidarity. No one to work under. The language was modern now, salted with talk of contractors, corporations, labour law, and online campaigns, but the note in it had not

changed from the days of Stoate. Youth, certainty, grievance sharpened by beer.

Bill watched them over the rim of his glass. He felt the old tightening in his chest.

Dick said quietly, “They’re just talking.”

“Stoate was just talking once.”

Dick did not answer at once. They both remembered where talk could end if a man built his identity around enemies.

“I don’t blame every young fool for what happened to us,” Bill said. “But I know the road when I see the first bend of it.”

They left before the argument at the bar could gather heat enough to spill. Outside, under the verandah lamps, the night felt cleaner. The river moved in the dark below the town. Bill checked the horses, checked the tack, and slept badly despite his weariness.

The ride home went quicker with no cattle to manage. The supplies from Jenny’s list were packed securely. At Pine Ridge they did not stop. At the first camp they passed the old ashes of their fire half hidden under fallen leaves. Tom rode better now. Callahan talked more. Even Dick, who found silence offensive under normal circumstances, seemed content to let the country go by without filling every mile with speech.

Near the district boundary a mob of kangaroos broke from the scrub and crossed in front of them, long grey bodies flowing over the grass in a single elastic motion. Tom watched them with open pleasure.

“I never get tired of seeing that.”

“Graziers do,” Callahan said. “They eat the feed.”

Tom still looked half enchanted. “Seems a shame.”

“Everything’s a shame and everything’s necessary,” Callahan replied. “That’s the bush.”

By the time they turned east toward Chidowla the light had gone gold. The familiar fences appeared. The creek caught the sun. Smoke lifted from the chimney of the cottage in a straight evening line.

Jenny was at the gate again when they rode in, Mary on one hip, Billy already breaking into a run before Bill had swung out of the saddle. The yard looked smaller somehow than it did when a man left it, more intimate and more complete. The dairy roof, the men’s huts, the paddocks dropping away in shadow, all of it wore the look of belonging.

“Did you sell them?” Billy demanded.

“We sold them.”

“For how much?”

“Enough.”

He handed Jenny the cheque summary first. She unfolded it, scanned the figure, and put it in her apron pocket without comment beyond a slight lift of the brows that was, from her, satisfaction.

Then he gave her the letter.

She looked at the departmental crest, broke the seal if only to preserve the appearance of first reading, and ran her eyes down the page. Her expression barely altered.

“Six hundred and forty acres,” she said. “Good grazing on the north side, sheltered from the westerlies. Better water than Donahue thought. We’ll need the western boundary fenced before spring.”

“You paid the deposit?”

“From the dairy account.”

“You didn’t think to mention it?”

“I wanted to hand you certainty, not a hope.”

He looked at her there in the fading light, the cheque in one pocket of her apron, the land approval in the other, Mary heavy on one hip and Billy clutching at his arm, and he could not decide whether to laugh or shake his head.

“Jenny Hardwick.”

“Yes?”

“You’re a phenomenon.”

“I’m a practical woman with a pencil and a banker who listens.”

Inside, supper was already laid. The Donahues came over, and the children filled the room with the soft chaos of healthy, fed youngsters nearing the end of a long day. Cold beef, fresh bread, yellow butter, cheese of Jenny’s own making. Bower sat at the end of the table and ate in exact silence, every crust accounted for. Biddy heard the land news and set down the bread knife in astonishment.

“You bought what?”

“The back country above the creek.”

“Without telling anybody?”

“I told Calthorpe.”

Biddy stared, then gave a low whistle. “Jenny Hardwick, you are a terror.”

“I prefer competent.”

Everyone laughed, even Bower by the smallest possible movement at the mouth.

After the Donahues had gone and the children were in bed, Jenny and Bill sat on the verandah while the frogs called from the creek and the stars turned above the dark paddocks. The new land lay invisible beyond the north fence but felt present all the same, like weather approaching.

“Autumn’s turning,” Jenny said, sewing something small and practical in the lamplight. “There’ll be frost by week’s end.”

“The cattle will stand it.”

“And the shearing this year?”

He took the pipe from his mouth and looked out over the place they had made.

“No,” he said at last. “I’m staying home. Dick can handle the contracts. Six hundred and forty acres won’t fence themselves.”

Jenny’s needle paused, though she did not otherwise betray the depth of her satisfaction.

“I thought you might say that.”

He let the silence settle. Then he said, “That SUV you wanted. The one with decent air-conditioning.”

She looked up.

"I ordered one in Tumut. Hickory and iron. Leather seats. It'll be ready by Christmas."

The look she gave him then was worth the price of the thing twice over. Not because she was easy to please, but because she was not. Her pleasure, when earned, had weight.

"Bill Hardwick," she said softly.

He reached across the gap between their chairs, and she put her hand in his.

Below them in the dark the cattle breathed in the lower paddock. From the men's huts came no sound now; the place was asleep. The creek ran over stones. The mopoke called once from the ridge. Beyond the fences, the new block waited for clearing, pegging, labour, and money. The old tasks were not finished. The new ones had already begun. That was the law of any life worth having.

Yet on that verandah, with the lamp behind them and the night opening over the country they had fought to keep, Bill felt something close to peace. Not the foolish kind that imagined trouble over, but the kind that came when a man finally understood what side he belonged on.

Home, he thought. Not a word said lightly in this country. Not a thing won cheaply.

Jenny's thumb moved once against the back of his hand. Together they sat looking out into the dark, where paddock became creek, creek became ridge, and ridge became stars, while the country itself held them in its hard, patient keeping.

Chapter 9

Reedy Lake

At five minutes to six on a winter morning in 2025, Bourke Street looked less like the center of a rising state than the abandoned stage of a dream. Streetlights burned in pale yellow puddles along the wet asphalt. The post office clock stood dark against a bruised sky, its face just legible in the half-light. Somewhere in the maze of lanes behind the warehouses a dog barked once and was silent.

Below the clock, the V/Line coach to Bendigo stood ready, diesel idling softly in the cold.

Robert Doyle, who had slept badly at the hotel and resented it, climbed aboard before the bell had done striking the quarter and chose a seat near the front. He was in his late twenties, spare in build, clean-shaven, and neatly turned out in a greatcoat that had cost too much to be called practical and yet had already seen enough weather to qualify as one. His leather valise was stowed in the hold, his gloves buttoned, his collar turned up against the June cold. He had money enough to travel

decently, breeding enough not to complain of discomfort, and ambition enough to weigh every inconvenience against its possible profit.

The driver did not acknowledge him.

Jackson sat high in the driver's seat with both hands loose on the wheel, broad-shouldered, fair-bearded, and pale-eyed, his face flattened by years of road work and too little patience. He looked neither to right nor left, and if he noted Doyle's presence at all he did so as he might have noted a parcel loaded for carriage: something to be conveyed, not consulted.

Doyle waited through the last two minutes in a silence so complete that the ticking of the clock seemed to grow louder with every second. He looked once up the street, once down it, then back at the coach with its fogged windows and wet yellow paint under the lamps. Even standing still, it had the peculiar air of a machine built to spend its life between distances.

The first stroke of six went out over the street.

Jackson eased the coach away from the kerb with the abrupt confidence of a man who treated traffic as a nuisance rather than a fact. Doyle's head knocked lightly against the seat as they cleared the stop. Tyres hissed over wet tram lines. Streetlights slid past in yellow smears. A pedestrian stepped back from the curb. An upper window went bright, held the white shape of a woman's face for a second, and went dark again.

Melbourne fell away behind them before Doyle had adjusted to the speed.

By the time they took Keilor at a pace better suited to a private motorway run than a regional service, Doyle understood that Jackson belonged to that small and alarming class of men whose competence renders argument ridiculous. The coach rocked sickeningly in crosswind. The bridge boomed beneath the tyres. Wind tore at the bodywork. Yet the driver's hands scarcely seemed to move. He allowed the vehicle to run where a timid man would have checked it and checked it where a fool would have let it drift, and the whole machine passed through danger with the strange inevitability of weather.

A nervous passenger eventually found courage enough to lean forward and suggest that a more moderate rate of progress might perhaps be desirable. Jackson did not even turn his head. The silence that followed sent the man back into his seat as neatly as if he had been struck.

The road worsened. Flood damage forced long detours through patched shire roads and farm tracks. At one creek crossing they hit a pothole so hard it threw every passenger awake. Later in the dark a rear tyre blew and sent them onto the shoulder. Each disaster Jackson met with the same infuriating composure. He stepped down, assessed, and set to work without waste of word or movement. Near Sawpit Gully, when a mobile tyre service had to be called and the repair done under floodlights in the middle of the night, another young man appeared out of the dark and took command of the job with such quick intelligence that Doyle remembered his face: dark-haired, wiry, calm, and decisive. Al Hamilton, the mechanic called him. Before most men would have

finished cursing the country road and the darkness, the coach was back on and under way again.

By late afternoon the next day they rolled into Bendigo through a crowd assembled to witness the arrival as if it were a performance laid on for public benefit. Gold had made the town rich too quickly to make it orderly. The streets were a tumult of miners in red flannel and moleskins, utes bogged to the chassis in construction churn, sly-grog signs, assay offices, storekeepers, Chinese carriers, dogs, children, half-built hotels, and men who looked as if they had either made fortunes before breakfast or lost them by noon. Smoke lay over the diggings. Mullock heaps rose in pale mounds beyond the last buildings like spoil from a siege.

Doyle put up at Hefferman's and slept under a roof for one night only. The following morning he was outside before breakfast, his valise at his feet, when the vehicle that was to take him on to Reedy Lake came rattling round the corner.

It was not, at first sight, an encouraging conveyance.

It was a weather-beaten tray-back ute with a welded dogbox, a cracked windscreen, and no obvious respect for comfort in its design. The paint had once been white. Mud, dust, and a season's worth of patched repairs had argued it into another colour altogether.

The driver braked hard outside the hotel and leaned sideways to inspect Doyle.

German Charlie was weathered to the colour of old bridle leather and whiskered almost to his eyes. His hat had surrendered

its original shape years before. His coat might at some remote date have belonged to a soldier. He looked like a man who had survived half the roads in the state by regarding catastrophe as an inconvenience to be mentioned only after dinner.

"You are the gentleman for Reedy Lake, ja?"

"I am Doyle."

Charlie tossed the valise into the back with one hand. "Reedy Lake. I take you to the door. Beyond all doubt you will be landed there to-morrow. I have always parcels for Mr. Keene."

He pronounced the name with a kind of respectful awe that was not lost on Doyle.

The journey north out of Bendigo was, if anything, more unnerving than the coach from Melbourne. Charlie drove half standing, half perched forward over the wheel, shouted in two languages at oncoming stock transports, and treated corrugations as a private insult. They tore past mine shafts, over narrow bridges that made Doyle shut his eyes once, through spray at Bullock Creek, and along temporary detours laid over flood-wrecked sections of road. When a tie-down snapped, Charlie fixed it. When a fuel line shook loose, Charlie mended it. When the ute bogged to the axles at a washed-out crossing, a freckled teenager in a recovery truck appeared from nowhere, delivered the deadpan verdict that they were not well set up for this sort of country, and proceeded to prove that he, at least, knew how to get them moving again.

At the Durham Ox, a solitary inn standing out on the plains as if dropped there by mistake, Doyle climbed down stiff and

half-frozen and found his attention captured not by the building or the supper but by a mob of cattle moving south in the dusk. They were extraordinarily fat. Every steer and heifer among them wore condition enough for market though it was midwinter and they had had nothing but the country under their feet. Their hides shone. Their backs were level. Even their gait carried the easy confidence of abundance.

Doyle leaned on the rail and watched them until the last beast had passed. He saw the great sweep of plain, the sparse salt-bush, the red patches of sandy loam between, and understood none of it except the final fact that whatever country could carry cattle in that condition in June deserved to be looked at with attention.

He rose before dawn with a mind more alert than it had been since leaving Melbourne.

By noon the country had opened into a scale he had not yet experienced. The ordinary marks by which a man measured distance in settled places—fences, hedges, gates, farms, church spires, cultivated paddocks—simply disappeared. The salt-bush began and continued, silver-green and endless, under a sky of such breadth that the eye tired before the land did. Here and there rose islands of timber or a creek line dark with river gums. Otherwise the plain flowed away without interruption.

Then German Charlie pointed with his whip.

A dark ribbon of water lay below a fringe of dead timber: Reedy Lake. Beyond it, more plain. More sky.

"The kingdom of Mr. Keene," Charlie said.

The head station did not in the least resemble a kingdom. It consisted of a neat weatherboard hut with a swept verandah, a larger barracks building, a detached kitchen, a handful of men's huts near the lake shore, a stockyard, a horse paddock, and the long low shadow of a woolshed almost lost in the old-man salt-bush. Yet the whole place possessed the unmistakable look of order. Nothing was grand. Nothing was wasted. A rake had passed over the earth before the hut. Gear was stowed where it belonged. The yards had been repaired where repair was needed. It gave Doyle, who was alive to such things, a more favorable impression than any number of ornamental improvements could have done.

Theophilus Keene came out of the smaller hut to meet him.

He was not at all what Doyle had expected. A slight fair man, carefully dressed, with a pointed beard and a manner more administrative than pastoral, he might have passed for a lawyer, consultant, or mid-level public servant if met in Collins Street. Nothing in him, at first glance, suggested a man who could manage sheep over country large enough to swallow smaller ambitions whole.

His handshake was brief and dry.

"Mr. Doyle. I am sincerely glad to see you. I had hoped you might arrive this week, though I confess I scarcely expected you to trust yourself to our mail."

"It delivered me," Doyle said.

"Charlie always does. Come in. You will be hungry. We dine in the barracks."

The meal was plain and excellent. Roast mutton, potatoes, damper, black tea, and a bottle of regional wine that Keene ignored. Afterward he explained the manner in which Reedy Lake was managed, not boastfully but with an exactness that made clearer with every minute the scale of the concern. Flocks were not fenced in paddocks but entrusted to shepherds. Improvements, beyond huts, stores, and the essential yards, were judged by their necessity rather than their show. Authority on such a property consisted less in ordering labor than in maintaining a system by which far-scattered men neither lost sheep nor starved themselves nor drifted into indiscipline. Keene described it all as if he were outlining a machine whose every motion he knew and had tested.

At length he laid a folded letter on the table.

Murrabit, one of the subdivisions of the run. Sixteen thousand sheep. Shepherds' huts, one hundred hurdles, no other improvements. Twenty-four thousand pounds. One-third cash or its equal. The balance by bills over three years.

Doyle read the figures twice.

"I should wish to see the country," he said, "and the sheep."

"Naturally. We ride in the morning."

That night Doyle walked down to the lake after the candles in the barracks had been put out. The silence of the inland was so complete that it had substance. It pressed on the ears. The stars were reflected in the black water with a steadiness impossible in a town. Dead white trunks stood in the shallows

like stripped bones. Beyond them the salt-bush made a pale wall, and beyond that there was only space.

He crouched and put his fingers into the water. It was cold and fresh. He had seen enough in one day to know that he stood at the edge of a country unlike any he had yet dealt with, and he felt, under the caution proper to business, the first dangerous stirring of desire.

Morning showed him the thing in full.

Keene crossed the frosted yard dressed as neatly as on the previous evening, and behind him a station hand led out two saddled horses. One was an ordinary chestnut. The other made Doyle stop where he stood on the barracks step.

Billy, Keene said.

The horse's fame had preceded him, and not unjustly. He was not large, but every point about him announced quality. The forehand clean and deep, the ribs round, the quarter powerful, the legs hard and true, the eye dark and intelligent. There was no theatrical spirit in him, no fidgeting display. He stood with the collected composure of an animal aware of his own powers.

"I have had Billy saddled for you," said Keene.

Doyle put a hand along the dark bay neck and felt the muscle move under the skin. It was impossible not to smile.

"This is a very fine horse."

"The horse you don't see now," Keene answered. "Fast, easy, and up to weight."

Doyle mounted. Billy moved off as if the horse and rider had previously discussed the matter and found themselves in

agreement. The stride was so smooth and ground-covering that after fifty yards Doyle understood why men spoke of the pony from the Loddon to the Murrumbidgee.

They rode north through the salt-bush with an overseer accompanying them. The country resolved itself under close inspection into richness disguised as barrenness. Dwarf salt-bush on the flats, taller old-man bushes in belts and hollows, here and there cotton-bush that Keene pointed out as the mark of superior fattening ground, and always the red loam between. Flocks moved over it in broad grey-white drifts, each attended by a solitary shepherd and dog. The sheep themselves were magnificent. Doyle dismounted among them more than once, drew back the wool, tested the flesh, felt rib and loin, and rose again with a steadier face than before.

No foot-rot. No fluke. No scab.

Nothing could look better.

The Murrabit country lay beyond a line of timber and a reed-fringed watercourse, opening at last into a breadth of pastoral country that might have been designed for temptation. Wethers stood enormous and fat, breeding ewes strong and uniform, weaners already carrying more flesh than Doyle would have believed possible in such youngsters. Each flock he examined confirmed what the cattle at the Durham Ox had suggested the previous evening: this plain, so bare to an ignorant eye, held wealth in its roots.

By midday even his caution could not wholly suppress the exultation beginning to take hold of him. He checked it as a

sensible man checks drink, by forcing himself back to particulars. Water. Shepherds. Huts. Markets. Distance. Freight. Rainfall, above all rainfall. He remembered suddenly the naked patches of red sandy earth between the salt-bush and asked Keene, almost too casually, about dry seasons.

Keene answered with the same precision he had used at dinner.

There were dry years, certainly. There were years when a man watched the sky until he learned hatred. But on such country the danger did not declare itself to the novice soon enough. That was its peculiar vice. The stock kept condition astonishingly well. A flock might graze over what appeared emptiness and still thrive, because the nourishment lay in shrubs a town-bred eye scarcely noticed. Then one season the rain failed for a month longer than was comfortable, or two months longer, and the country that had seemed inexhaustible disclosed the limit it had been carrying hidden all along.

Doyle listened. He looked again at the silver plains, the broad reed-beds, the water under the winter sun, the healthy sheep, and the horse beneath him, and he knew exactly how easy it would be to see only the promise.

That was, perhaps, the most dangerous part of Reedy Lake.

Not the remoteness. Not the size. Not even the price.

Its danger lay in the charm of a country that made a man imagine himself already equal to it.

They halted at last on a rise from which the greater part of the Murrabit run could be taken in with one long sweep of the

eye. To the south the salt-bush plain stretched away in silver and grey. To the east the reed-beds marked water with a green so vivid it seemed almost unnatural against the winter palette. To the north a lake caught the light in broad flashing plates. To the west the country ran on and on toward haze and distance.

Keene sat his horse quietly.

"Well, Mr. Doyle?"

Doyle did not answer at once. The sensible thing would have been to speak in figures, to ask another question, to conceal the degree to which the place had already worked upon him. But the plain honesty of the scene somehow forbade too much fencing.

"It is finer than I expected," he said at last.

Keene's expression altered by less than a smile.

"Most men think so, the first time."

The warning in that reply was gentle, but Doyle heard it.

They turned their horses back toward the head station in the early afternoon. Billy carried him as lightly in the return journey as he had gone out. Flocks opened and closed before them. Shepherds lifted hands in greeting. The sky remained pitilessly clear.

By the time the barracks roof came into sight again over the tops of the salt-bush, Doyle knew two things with certainty.

The first was that Murrabit, at the figures named, represented a temptation almost beyond prudence.

The second was that prudence, out in such a country, was not a quality a man could afford to lose for so much as an hour.

That evening, after supper, he asked for the papers again.

Chapter 10

The Horse You Don't See Now

At dawn the river camp was already alive. Red gums went down one by one at the Murray's edge, their trunks thirty feet around, their white limbs high against the pale sky. The men worked stripped to their shirts in the first copper light, broad-axes biting deep, crosscut saws singing through the heartwood, hatchets trimming the limbs away. When one of the big trees finally gave, the crack ran through the morning like a shot. The trunk paused as if reconsidering the matter, then came through the undergrowth with the sound of a building falling, shaking the bank and sending a dull wave across the brown river.

The logs were chained together in the shallows, pale where they had been freshly cut, ready to be floated downstream for the new woolshed. Everything at Murrabit seemed to require another load of timber, another cart of nails, another week of wages, another account settled before it could become useful. Doyle had learned that no frontier enterprise was built once. It was built every day.

Callaghan moved over the place with his tally-book and measuring chain, cool as a man counting sheep in an old paddock. He marked out the woolshed on the red-earth flat a quarter-mile

from the lake, paced the length of the horse paddock fence, calculated brush-yards, slab huts, hurdles, washers, lambers, and the future labour of men not yet hired. The carpenters squared red-gum beams with adzes until long pale curls lay on the ground like shavings of scented soap. Brush-yards rose out of salt-bush and sapling. Huts took shape slab by slab, bark sheet by bark sheet, each wall packed with mud and grass against the cutting night wind.

Doyle worked among them because there was no honest way to stand apart. He carried split slabs, hammered pegs, counted sheep at the races, and blistered both palms on green timber and rough rope. A year and a half earlier he had been writing cheques in Melbourne. Now he could feel the weight of a sapling rail on one shoulder and know from the tone of a hammer-blow whether a peg had bitten true. The bush made its changes without consulting vanity.

In the evening he sat across from Callaghan in the Moravian cottage on the bluff above Lake Boga while a shaded lamp burned between them and the station accounts lay open on the table like a book of judgment.

"What's the quarter's damage?" Doyle asked at last.

"Three hundred and twelve thousand," said Callaghan. "And that's before interest and commission."

Doyle squared the printed transfer confirmations on the tabletop and slipped them into an envelope. The amount was not ruinous; what unsettled him was the regularity of it. A station did not merely consume money in moments of crisis. It ate

steadily, methodically, through wages, freight, fencing wire, diesel, repairs, contractors, and the thousand ordinary leakages by which enterprise is reduced to arithmetic.

That same week a young man came up the track from Swan Hill on foot and asked civilly for a night's lodging. His clothes had once been good. His manners still were. Hunger had pared his face down to its structure, but not yet taken the schoolroom out of his voice. Doyle sent him to the men's hut and watched him go with his swag bobbing on his shoulders while one of the station dogs trotted after him to be patted.

Callaghan, coming up from the brush-yards, saw Doyle looking after the stranger.

"Who was that?"

"A traveller. Looking for work."

Callaghan opened the tally-book and made a note as if distress itself could be entered by the line. "There've been three this month. The educated ones are the worst off when things go bad. A working man can always work. A gentleman has farther to fall."

The remark stayed with Doyle. The station was drawing in all kinds now—shepherds, sawyers, drifters, failed clerks, younger sons, men from nowhere and men from decent families who had somehow arrived at the same gate. The bush reduced distinctions, but it never quite abolished them. It merely translated them into endurance, competence, and luck.

A few days later he rode Billy back to Reedy Lake.

Keene was on the verandah when Doyle came in. He looked older than he had even a season before, leaner through the face, the bones more visible, the strain of too many years holding a wide run together marked now around the eyes. Yet the old force remained. Billy, seeing him, dropped his head and nudged at his chest with an affection that made Doyle unexpectedly reluctant to give up the pony.

"You've kept him well," Keene said, running a hand down the little horse's neck.

"He's kept me well," Doyle answered.

They walked beside the lake while the water lapped softly at the bank and a few pelicans drifted far out in the light. Doyle told him what he had come for before he had quite decided to ask.

"I need a horse of my own. Something that can carry me fifty miles in a day and do it again tomorrow."

Keene nodded as if he had been waiting for the admission. "Then do not buy in the bush. The bush sells you stories. Go to Melbourne and buy the horse no one else sees."

Doyle smiled. "That sounds like instruction, not advice."

"It is both." Keene stopped and faced him. "Young men buy shoulder and colour and action. Fools buy breeding. The horse that lasts is often the one everybody passes over. The quiet one. The plain one. The one with a blemish that frightens the eye and means nothing to the judgment. Buy character, Mr. Doyle, not flash. Billy was twelve pounds at a Bendigo sale because nobody looked twice at him. Seventeen years later he's worth more than any fine-bred creature that ever failed under a soft rider."

He laid a hand flat against Billy's neck. "You want the horse you don't see now. The one hidden by some little fault from every man who values appearance over heart."

That settled it. Doyle took the early coach south the next morning.

The ride into Melbourne felt longer in reverse because he now belonged, at least partly, to the country he was leaving. The salt-bush gave way to grass, the grass to timber, the timber to the colder forests of the Divide, then to the ordered paddocks and hedged farms of the settled districts. When at last the outskirts of the city thickened around the bus—the trucks, gigs, loaded wagons, church spires, brick farmhouses, and finally the broad clatter of Melbourne itself—Doyle found the town clothes he had put on for the journey constricting in a way they never once had before.

Collins Street was all polished glass, winter coats, office towers reflected in old facades, and men and women stepping from law firms, clubs, and banks with takeaway coffee in one hand and phones in the other as if money were a climate. Doyle had gone scarcely half an hour in the quiet of the club before a staff member appeared beside his chair to say that a man in a ute waited outside. Sent from Toorak. Urgent.

At once the city altered from spectacle to instrument.

The horse in the float outside the club was a dark bay, not large, but deep through the chest and standing as if each leg knew precisely what it was for. Doyle scarcely noticed him at first. His aunt was ill, perhaps dying, and all the good road to

Toorak disappeared under the simple necessity of getting there quickly. He took the keys to the borrowed ute and drove.

The bay answered from the first touch once they unloaded him at the property and Doyle swung into the saddle. Over Princes Bridge and out through the South Yarra traffic they went without checking speed more than sense required, then on along the road to Toorak at such a pace that slower vehicles seemed to loosen and fall behind of their own accord. The horse wanted little from the crop and nothing from fuss. He travelled the way a practised musician plays a familiar piece: with reserve, power, and an exact understanding of when to give more.

For the next anxious week Doyle scarcely thought of anything but the sickroom. He drove doctors, fetched a nurse, collected prescriptions from a twenty-four-hour pharmacy, and crossed Melbourne at every hour of the day. Yet repetition forced observation upon him. Every time he came out and took up the reins or swung back into the driver's seat, the dark bay stood where he had left him. No pawing, no fretting, no dragging against the lead. Only that curious, steady weaving of the head - left, right, left again - as though patience in him had become a physical motion.

He passed nearly everything on the road. One grey trotter kept level for perhaps fifty yards before the bay quietly lengthened and left him. In crowded streets the horse neither flinched nor blundered. Timber trucks thundered by, delivery vans cut too close, rideshares lurched to the curb, dogs barked

beneath the wheels. The bay did not waste an ounce of himself on alarm.

On the morning the crisis passed and the news at the villa turned for the better, Doyle came out at last with enough calm in him to see what had been carrying him all week.

The horse stood at the rail, head weaving gently, dark coat catching the winter light. Released from greater fear, Doyle looked properly. He walked around the animal once, then again more slowly. Good shoulder. Deep girth. Clean bone. Sound feet. The eye large and mild. Seven years old, or near enough. Then the flaw: an old scar across one knee, well healed, and a slight beginning of knuckling at the pasterns.

He bent and ran his hand lower, feeling for heat, swelling, weakness. There was none worth fearing. The broken knee had been accident, not constitution. The knuckling, in his judgment, would mend with rest and sensible handling. The horse could not fall into himself. More important, he had gone all week like a machine without ceasing to be a living creature.

Doyle put his palm flat against the horse's forehead. The bay breathed out once against his wrist and watched him as if waiting to be understood.

Keene's words returned with ridiculous force.

The horse you don't see now.

He asked where the horse had been hired and was directed to Washington's stables on the city's edge.

Mr. Washington proved to be a large American with enormous hands, a leather apron, and a look at once shrewd and kind. He

came out into the yard and became guarded the instant Doyle named the horse.

"I want to buy him," Doyle said.

Washington folded his arms and looked past Doyle toward the bay in the shafts. "He's de favouritest animile in my stable, boss. All de young ladies ask for him. Don' know what I'd do athout him."

"Then charge me accordingly," said Doyle. "I'm not asking you to like it. I'm asking your price."

Washington looked again. He knew what he owned. He also knew, perhaps, that some horses were not made to live forever between shafts and city streets. "Thirty pounds," he said at last. "And you'll never be sorry."

It was more than Doyle had intended. It was also, he saw at once, fair. He transferred the deposit on his phone while a stable hand brought out a saddle and bridle. Washington himself unharnessed the bay, holding him at the head with the grave care one gives a favourite dog or an old child. Once the girth was tightened and the bridle on, the horse changed. In harness he had been patient. Under saddle he gathered himself from within, all readiness and contained strength.

"He don't like a hard rain," Washington said, folding the cheque with ceremony and sliding it into his apron. "Gets his head down and studies the matter. He weaves in a stall till you think he'll wear a groove in the floor. But he won't kick and he won't bite. Stand him in trouble and he'll stand."

"Has he a name?"

Washington hesitated. "We've called him a number of things. None of 'em important."

Doyle looked up at the horse, at the broad forehead and mild eye and the sense of inward steadiness that no scar could disguise. "Then he can start fresh. Doyen."

Washington tried the word, nodded, and stepped back. "Take care of him. He's one of the right sort."

Doyle rode out of the yard feeling, not for the first time, that he had purchased more than he strictly deserved.

One horse was not enough. He wanted a match for distance, if not in temper then in power, and so he went on to a Lonsdale Street equine transport yard, where Mr. Beck showed him a line of useful enough animals before bringing out a bay known as Railway.

If Doyen was all inward worth and hidden quality, Railway announced himself at once. He came out of the stall arched in the neck, bright in the eye, light through the waist but with four excellent legs and a shoulder that promised work. Doyle mistrusted him on sight for being too handsome by half. Beck only laughed and had him loaded into a two-horse float for the trial run on the edge of town.

The trial cured doubt. Beck took him out through crowded streets and across Collins at a pace that made slower traffic part before them. Railway travelled fast without scrambling, proud without waste, his feet reaching true and quick over the bitumen. By the time they pulled up again Doyle had surrendered the argument.

"He can go," he said.

"That he can," Beck replied. "Forty pounds."

The transfer hurt more this time, perhaps because it came second, perhaps because good horses always looked as if they ought to cost less than they did. But Doyle made it and shook hands on the bargain.

When he rode out of Melbourne for the north, Doyen carried him and Railway followed on a long lead, studying this new arrangement with pricked ears and a degree of self-regard that would have been comic in a lesser animal. Through the settled districts and then the heavier country toward the Divide they travelled steadily, changing shape in the public imagination with each day of road. In the city he had been a bush station man buying horses. On the long roads north he was merely another man with money tied up in horseflesh and weather to consider.

He camped where he could, fed both animals carefully, and watched them in the evenings with the concentration of a man measuring future luck. Railway was exactly what he appeared to be—spirited, vain, quick to notice himself in any puddle or polished pane, but willing and tireless once set to work. Doyen was quieter, the better company by far, and watched Doyle with an intelligence unsettlingly close to comprehension.

By the time the salt-bush country opened again and the big plains resumed around him, Doyle knew he had done one wise thing at least.

He rode first into Reedy Lake because the purchase belonged there by right of advice. Keene came out and said nothing for several moments after examining both horses. He went down each

leg, lifted hooves, studied shoulders, backs, eyes, and temper. Railway tossed his head under the inspection as if conscious of being admired. Doyen merely stood and breathed.

At last Keene stepped back from the dark bay and gave the smallest of nods.

"There," he said. "That's him. That's the horse you don't see now. The one men miss because they are offended by a scar and blinded by a brighter coat standing near him."

Doyle laughed. "Then I have not disgraced my instructor."

"Not this time." Keene gave Billy one last stroke before the pony was led away to the paddock. "Remember what you've bought. Not just speed. Not just soundness. Character. Never mistake one for the other."

The words mattered because Doyle was beginning, in ways he had not fully admitted, to understand that horses and stations and men all submitted to a similar law. The obvious qualities carried a high price and often a short life. What endured was harder to spot: patience, heart, steadiness, the willingness to go on under strain. The world, especially the regional world, made much of flash. Survival belonged more often to something else.

When he brought the two horses into Murrabit, Callaghan came out from the yards with the accounts still in hand.

"You've been spending money," he observed.

"I have."

Callaghan looked first at Railway and then at Doyen. Even he, who trusted nothing that could not be entered in a ledger, gave the dark bay a second glance. "That one will do," he said.

"Which one?"

"The one most men would not have chosen."

Doyle smiled, led Doyen toward the new paddock, and felt in the evening wind off the plain that small, dangerous comfort by which men ruin themselves and sometimes save themselves: the belief that they have, for once, judged rightly.

Chapter 11

The Free Selector / Bush Hospitality

By the time the west wind came up three days running, everybody in the Murrabit district knew that Edward Lyle's holding had entered a new stage of danger.

That was how country talk worked in 2026. The first notice came in an email from a government office in Bendigo, a PDF with seals and signatures and a filename too long for any sane person to trust. The second came as a screenshot forwarded three times through district group chats until half the selectors between Swan Hill and the lower timber knew that Lyle had his certificate of improvement in hand. The third came the old way, which was still the way that mattered most: riders, utes, kitchen tables, stock ramps, the public bar, women talking over flour tins, men talking through their teeth at the fuel bowsers, everybody deciding what the paper meant before the law had finished explaining itself.

At dawn the wind moved low over Reedy Lake and pushed little rivers of dust across the flats. The lake had fallen again, leaving a black ring of soft mud around the edge and a sour smell

where reeds had gone to rot in the shallows. On the selector's block the new hut stood square against it all, rough but undeniable: slab walls, bark roof, a tin flue properly braced, a fenced kitchen patch, a water tank cut shallow and lined by hand, bean stakes in two precise rows, and smoke coming out of the chimney at the right hour in the right quantity.

Anna Lyle came to the doorway with flour on both hands and looked up at the sky as if judging whether it intended weather or only malice. Behind her Rose knelt at the fire, coaxing heat into damp kindling while Lyle crossed from the soak with two buckets of water, his shirt dark between the shoulders. He had lost the look of a city man almost without noticing it. His palms had toughened, his back had bent into the shape of useful work, and the uncertainty in him now showed only when he sat still.

The rider who appeared through the drift of dust was Doyle, mounted on Billy and leaning a little forward with the impatience of a man who had started before full light because he wanted to be first to the news.

He handed Lyle a folded document inside a clear plastic sleeve. Government crest. Electronic stamp. Verification code at the bottom.

"It's real?" Anna asked.

"For the moment," Doyle said. "Thursby bullied a clerk in Swan Hill, called another one in Melbourne, and threatened to camp on somebody's doorstep till they processed it. The department appears to have decided it was cheaper to certify you."

Rose dried her hands on her skirt and moved closer.

“Does that mean we stay?”

Doyle glanced at the hut, the fence, the bean rows, the stacked timber by the wall.

“It means you’re no longer invisible,” he said. “That’s not the same thing as safe.”

Callaghan arrived a minute later with seed potatoes, onion seed, and the expression of a man who had expected trouble and was annoyed to find that expectation justified so early in the day. He had also brought a sack of feed and a spare length of pipe because he never went anywhere in the district without half-consciously provisioning for the collapse of civilization.

“They’ll contest it,” Lyle said, still reading the certificate as though the words might alter if he blinked.

“Of course they will,” Callaghan said. “Men can tolerate almost anything except another man proving himself on land they expected to keep vague.”

A distant rattle came over the flat. Then the shape of a government vehicle resolved itself out of the dust: a white four-wheel-drive ute towing a trailer loaded with survey pegs, chains, rods, rolled plans, and two orange water coolers. Behind it came a second utility with a constable in it and a young clerk whose face suggested he had understood the posting as an administrative errand and only now realized it involved the Murrabit district.

The surveyor who climbed down was Mr. Pearce, forty or thereabouts, city neat, cuffs too good for the country and boots

already reddening from dust. He preferred maps to people, which in Doyle's view counted as a moral advantage.

"I am instructed to verify occupation, frontage, and improvements on the allotment entered in the name of Edward Lyle," Pearce said.

"Government loses no time when there's a quarrel available," Callaghan murmured.

Pearce ignored him. Barnes, the local constable, got out of the second ute, tipped his hat to Anna, and took in the ground in one long practised glance. He noticed the old charred ruin beyond the waterhole. He noticed the new hut. He noticed, too, the rider approaching at speed from the Reedy Lake side before the rest of them did.

Smith pulled up hard and stayed seated in the saddle, boot in stirrup, hat brim low, every line of him carrying Keene's displeasure at one remove.

"James Keene of Reedy Lake claims the adjoining frontage and riparian use long established before any selector saw this ground," he said.

"Then Mr. Keene may present that claim in a form more useful than your face," Callaghan replied.

Pearce's mouth moved a fraction, the nearest he came to a smile.

They began the inspection. Chains stretched out across the flats. GPS points were checked and then rechecked because satellite certainty meant nothing if the boundary line crossed a soak, a cut track, or a patch of ground where three men had been

lying to one another for fifteen years. Pearce asked clipped questions. Lyle answered with more steadiness than he felt. Anna brought out a ledger leaf folded in cloth: costs entered in her neat hand, dates of purchase, days worked, fencing wire, nails, fuel, the second-hand water tank, seed, feed, roofing iron, the solar battery they had bought used from a caravan repair place in town.

“The law notices marks before it notices faces,” Pearce said at one point, studying the plan against the ground.

Rose, standing with both hands on the fence rail, answered before any of the adults could.

“Then the law is rude.”

Barnes coughed to hide a laugh. Pearce wrote something in his notebook and said, “That may also be true.”

At the old ruin they stopped. The blackened posts still pushed from the ground at angles, and the brick base remained like bad teeth in a broken jaw.

“Previous occupation?” Pearce asked.

No one answered at once. Then Callaghan said, “Thomas Morrow.”

“And why were the improvements left in this state?”

Eleanor arrived with Thursby in the middle of the question, both on horseback, both looking as if the district had offended them personally. Eleanor wore a dark jacket, denim, riding boots, and the kind of expression that usually preceded trouble for somebody else.

“Because he did not leave them,” she said. “He died there.”

Pearce looked from face to face and saw at once what sort of place he had come into: one of those country knots where land, memory, violence, and paperwork had been pulled together for so long that none could be separated cleanly from the others.

“This inspection concerns occupation, not legend,” he said.

“Legend,” Eleanor said, “is what men call a fact they have decided to outlive.”

Pearce shut his case with a little more force than required. “I have seen enough for a preliminary return.”

“On whose side?” Smith asked.

“On the side of what is present on the ground.”

It was a dangerous answer only because it was literal.

When the vehicles rolled away, leaving fresh tyre tracks and survey pegs in the dirt, the little place looked at once more established and more exposed. Anna took the certificate inside and placed it in the cedar chest beneath folded blankets and Rose’s school books. Doyle saw the whole modest inventory as he stood in the doorway with his tea: iron pot polished bright from use, onions drying from a peg, a crate-end shelf with a Bible beside a dog-eared novel, a blue bead tied on ribbon above the hearth like a charm against the district’s memory.

“Since the law has visited,” Anna said, handing out tin cups, “we may as well behave as though we are settled people.”

Thursby lifted his cup. “Civilization has begun from less.”

The wind moved again over the flat. Out on the rise Smith had stopped and turned in the saddle. He watched them still. The gesture was small, but it sent a chill through Doyle not because

it threatened action, but because it promised account-keeping. Keene's people counted everything.

"Now it begins," Eleanor said.

"No," Thursby answered. "Now it becomes legible."

That afternoon Doyle and Callaghan rode to Griffith's public house because the district could never allow an event to rest while it was still capable of becoming an argument. The place crouched beside the track beneath a warped verandah, with two Hiluxes, a battered stock trailer, three horses, and a grain truck parked outside in no order that made sense except to the men who owned them.

Inside, smoke hung below the ceiling fans and everybody pretended not to have come for news. Keene stood at the far end of the room with a glass untouched in hand. Smith was beside him. Ransom occupied a table with two men Doyle had not seen before, both broad through the shoulders and carrying themselves with the overdone care of people who wanted to be taken for more than they were.

Jabez Crick rose to greet Doyle with theatrical politeness. His brother Jonas remained seated, slower in expression and harder in the eye.

"Selectors," Jabez said when Callaghan asked what species of nuisance they were. "Free men under the Crown."

"In this century under the state, the Commonwealth, three agencies, and a bank," Callaghan said. "But do go on."

They talked the way men in the bush talked when property was at stake: half in jest, wholly in menace. Keene inquired after

the inspection as if making idle conversation. Doyle answered as though reciting weather. Jabez declared it a splendid season for little men, for certificates, for garden fences, for every nobody with a caravan, an ABN, and six months' patience to call himself landed. Smith smiled without humour. Griffith polished the same glass for ten minutes rather than be forced to take a side.

The conversation sharpened when Jabez suggested that Murrabit had grown tender-hearted toward encroachment.

"I prefer visible work to invisible claims," Doyle said.

Keene turned the untouched glass between his fingers. "You have become zealous."

"I have become observant."

The thing might have ended there if the district were made of saints. Instead Jabez, who had the instincts of a camp cur and the appetite of a gossip columnist, made an ugly little speech about how the law had always favoured men with polish until recently, and how perhaps the age of station gentlemen was giving way to people who did not consider old names sacred.

"Good," Callaghan said. "Perhaps the age of bores will end next."

Laughter broke around the room, but not all of it was kind.

Keene said quietly, "The difficulty with improvising a social revolution in this district is that one still requires roads, pumps, yards, fuel, stores, and credit. All of which exist because someone had to build them before he was hated for possessing them."

"You confuse possession with virtue," Doyle said.

"And you confuse opposition with character."

The room tightened. One more sentence might have tipped it into a fight. Griffith himself came from behind the bar with a plate of sausage rolls no one had ordered and forced the company apart through sheer publican's instinct for preventing broken furniture.

Doyle left with Callaghan before sunset. He did not like the taste the room had left in him. Selector feeling could be righteous and still be easily used. Keene, who distrusted new men on principle, would use it one way; the Cricks, who believed every grievance was a title deed, another. Somewhere between them Lyle and Anna were trying to plant onions on contested soil and call it life.

The funeral at the Mowbray selection two days later drew half the district because grief in the bush was never private if the dead man had once lent feed in a flood, stood surety for a neighbour, or spoken for someone at the bank. Mrs. Mowbray's husband had done all three. By ten in the morning drays, utes, horse floats, old SUVs, and one council vehicle were scattered about the yard under the thin shade of ragged box timber. Women moved in and out of the hut carrying platters. Men stood in knots with their hats off, talking low while studying one another over the rims of enamel mugs.

Doyle brought flour, tea, salt beef, blankets, and tools enough to look as though he meant to outfit a relief convoy. Callaghan insisted on every item. Eleanor rode with them and treated the whole business less as a condolence call than as a

military exercise in which gossip, grief, and status would be brought into unstable proximity.

“You disapproved of this hospitality yesterday,” Doyle said to Callaghan as they unloaded.

“I disapproved of opening your stores to every malcontent with a horse and a grievance,” Callaghan said. “I did not disapprove of decency to the dead. Such distinctions are the only thing between us and savagery.”

Mrs. Mowbray, late fifties, broad-shouldered despite grief, directed the yard from her doorway with the authority of a general under ration pressure. When she saw the provisions she told Callaghan that Heaven might forgive his breeding because her kitchen would not. It was the kindest thing she said all day.

Inside, the main room had been ordered into solemnity by force of will. The coffin rested on trestles at one end. Candles burned beside it. Women in dark cotton poured tea, cut bread, sewed black ribbon, hushed children, and took stock of every arrival in the room without appearing to look at anyone directly. The men removed hats, lowered voices, and ate because refusal would insult the house.

Doyle saw selectors, run-holders, a bank clerk from Swan Hill, Pearce the surveyor, Griffith the publican, Barnes the constable, Thursby, and two men from the shire office who had almost certainly come as much to observe as to mourn.

Keene stood by the hearth in a black coat, speaking to the priest in the air of a man prepared to treat mortality as one more administrative complication.

Eleanor stopped a fraction when she saw him.

Keene saw her. Then Doyle. His face altered almost not at all.

“Miss Mowbray has assembled Parliament,” he said.

“I assembled mourners,” Mrs. Mowbray answered from behind them. “Parliament invited itself, as it always does when there is cold meat to be had.”

Her authority kept the peace for perhaps seven minutes.

The priest called the room to prayer. Even the talkers fell still. When the time came to lift the coffin, Doyle found himself at one handle, Keene at another, and Lyle—new black coat hanging loose on him as if borrowed from a better-fed man—taking a third. The fourth was a bullock driver from downriver who had once owed Mowbray money and never forgotten the manner in which the debt had been forgiven.

They lifted together. For one hard second all the district’s quarrels went silent beneath plain physical duty. The box had weight; grief always did.

At the burial ground, fenced beneath two bent red gums beyond the creek, the prayers finished under a sky that still could not decide on rain. Earth struck timber. Hats stayed off. Horses shifted and blew in the cold.

The late arrival came as people were beginning to turn away. A gaunt rider on a poor mare crossed from the timber line with an old dark coat buttoned high and the careful seat of a man who had once ridden finer horses into finer company and had never quite forgiven history for the exchange.

Adrian Fane looked about fifty and older in certain lights. His beard was neatly kept in defiance of poverty. His gloves had been cleaned rather than replaced. Everything about him suggested former elegance reduced past comfort but not past pride.

He dismounted with old-fashioned precision and took Mrs. Mowbray’s hand.

“He once lent me money and declined to remember it,” Fane said of the dead man. “Such men deserve punctuality. Providence, as usual, disagreed.”

His eyes moved over the company. Rested a moment on Keene. Moved away. Eleanor noticed. So did Doyle.

The second life of country mourning began when they returned to the yard: eating, storytelling, whisky, tea, and the gradual re-emergence of politics under cover of piety. Long tables were set beneath an awning rigged between the hut and a line of carts. Plates moved. Bottles moved. So did opinion.

Fane sat slightly apart with a cup of tea and a plate untouched on his knees, looking like a dismissed minister invited back for ornamental value. Doyle joined him because there was intelligence in the man and because district life rewarded anyone who knew how old stories connected to new fights.

“The district’s new conscience,” Fane said when Doyle introduced himself.

“I was unaware I had been elected.”

“It never elects,” Fane replied. “It merely stares until a man begins to behave as though watched.”

Eleanor brought tea for both of them and warned that if she arrived with whisky they would become literary. Fane told her he remembered her at twelve correcting a curate's Latin in her father's drawing room. She said it had been bad Latin. He answered that this was exactly his point.

The yard seemed on the brink of civility until Jabez Crick, already drunk enough to consider himself representative, rose with a mug in hand and shouted a toast to the men who worked the ground and to hell with paper lords.

Silence followed it too quickly.

Mrs. Mowbray slammed a platter on the table so hard the cups jumped.

"Mr. Crick," she said, "if you intend to damn half my guests, do it after the pies are gone. I will not waste pastry on principles."

Laughter ran through the yard and nearly saved the day. Nearly.

But the Cricks were too new to understand the kind of mercy they had been offered. Jabez kept on, talking louder now, about free selectors, old monopolies, dead men whose names still fenced the living, the right of any hardworking family to come onto ground long held idle or underused. None of it was wholly false, which made it more dangerous. Jonas stood behind him with the heavy patience of a man prepared to help foolishness become violence.

Keene crossed the yard without hurry. That was the way he did almost everything threatening.

“This is a mourning house,” he said.

Jabez lifted his mug. “And a free country, I’m told.”

“A phrase often used by men who plan to leave others to pay for its consequences.”

Doyle was moving before he knew he had decided to. He came in on Jabez’s flank not because Keene required assistance, but because once a funeral yard tipped into faction, every old grievance in the district would attach itself like burrs.

“That’s enough,” he said.

Jabez swung toward him with the bright, delighted anger of a drunk who has found his audience. “You always turn up where there’s a principle to be leased cheap.”

“And you turn up where there’s food,” Callaghan said from behind him. “Which is at least more honest.”

Barnes appeared next, then Pearce, then Mrs. Mowbray herself with a carving knife still in hand, flour on one sleeve, grief turned to fury so complete it made all male posturing look childish.

“Any man who starts a fight in this yard,” she said, “will finish it in the creek with my sons, my cousins, and whichever women happen to be free. I buried one husband this week. I am not taking applications for another corpse.”

That ended it because there are forms of authority older than law and less negotiable than pride.

Jabez muttered. Jonas took hold of his elbow and said something too low to catch. They withdrew by degrees, not with grace but with calculation. Keene stepped back. Doyle did the

same. Fane, who had remained seated, watched the whole thing with melancholy satisfaction.

“Civilization,” he murmured, “depends chiefly upon formidable widows.”

As daylight slanted and the first departures began, Barnes found Callaghan near the horse rail and passed on news from town: Smith had engaged counsel. Nothing formal yet beyond his own exposure and the Cricks’, but enough movement to make the district restless.

“Formally is for paper,” Callaghan said. “The district heard enough already.”

“It heard,” Barnes answered. “It has not finished deciding what it heard.”

That line stayed with Doyle on the ride home.

The flats were going grey by then. Reedy Lake held the last of the light in broken strips between reeds. Eleanor rode in silence beside him a long way before saying, “Your district becomes impossible precisely in proportion to the number of people trying to improve it.”

“It isn’t my district,” Doyle said.

“It has begun behaving as though it were.”

Ahead of them the dray creaked. Behind, Callaghan rode like a rear guard escorting a retreat from some minor campaign. The funeral had changed nothing and clarified much. Lyle’s certificate would stand or fail in a world where pity, appetite, law, memory, class, and weather never aligned for long. Hospitality could still hold men together for an afternoon. After

that they returned to counting fence-lines, water rights, rumours, and injuries.

At the selector’s hut Anna had hung a small solar lantern outside the door. It shone faint and stubborn through the wind as they passed the rise. Doyle looked toward it and thought that the district hated nothing so much as a light that suggested permanence where permanence had not yet been socially approved.

“Do you think they’ll let him keep it?” Eleanor asked.

Doyle watched the little square of light and the low dark outline of the hut behind it.

“No,” he said. “I think he’ll have to keep it himself.”

Chapter 12

A Forgotten Tragedy

By a quarter past five on a winter morning in 2026, Murrabit had the look of a place that had slept in its boots and expected trouble before breakfast. The yard lay cold and colourless under a paling sky. The dogs had begun barking before the riders came in, and by the time Doyle stepped from the verandah buttoning his coat, everyone on the station was already moving toward the same unease.

Smith came first out of the eastern dark, white-faced beneath road dust and dried sweat. Behind him rode one of Keene's men from Reedy, and behind that a mounted constable whose horse was blown hard enough to show white at the foam-flecked bit. Beck came from the stable with a saddle blanket over one shoulder. Callaghan emerged from the store with yesterday's ledger still open in his hand. Lyle crossed the yard from the huts pulling on his braces and looking as if he had never been properly asleep.

Smith swung down before the horse had fully stopped.

"They're moving already," he said.

Callaghan shut the ledger. "Who."

"Everybody with a grievance and a ute."

The constable handed Doyle a folded notice. Barnes requested his attendance at Reedy by eleven. Fane had lodged complaint. So

had Keene. So, the constable added with professional fatigue, had several selectors who had only recently discovered both righteous indignation and email access.

Doyle read the notice once and looked up. “What else.”

Smith pointed east with two fingers. “Crick had twenty men at the reed crossing before dawn. Not drunks this time. Men with posts, wire, tools, a trailer-mounted water tank, and one fellow with a tablet trying to act like the Department had already approved the frontage. They mean to peg the line before anyone can stop them.”

Keene’s hand leaned forward in the saddle. “Mr. Keene says if that frontage goes, the run breaks in two.”

“That,” Callaghan said dryly, “was always the point.”

Rose appeared in the doorway wrapped in a blanket, Anna behind her, and for a moment the whole station looked less like a business than a household caught in the draft of district politics. Doyle folded the paper.

“Get the women and the child over to the mission cottage for the morning,” he said. “Take the cart. Beck stays with them till noon. Smith rides ahead and does not start a war if he can remember how. Lyle, with me. Callaghan, bring the map case and the copies of the lease file. I’ll go to Reedy once I’ve seen the lower road with my own eyes.”

“It is war, then?” Rose asked.

“Not officially,” Callaghan said. “Go inside and let us be disappointed in peace.”

No one laughed. The day had gone beyond that before sunrise.

By the time Doyle and the others reached the lower boundary road, the selectors were already there in force. Crick had placed them well: not far enough in to make retreat impossible, but deep enough to create confusion, photographs, and the appearance of a claim. They had trailers, steel posts, rolled fencing wire, shovels, fuel cans, eskies, and printed forms in plastic sleeves. A clerkly youth sat on the tailgate of a ute with a laptop balanced on his knees and a portable hotspot blinking uselessly blue beside him.

What made the scene dangerous was not drunkenness but preparation. These men had come to stay if they could.

Crick raised a hand in theatrical greeting. “There he is. Murrabit’s philosopher.”

Doyle reined in. “Morning.”

“A fine one for the poor at last.” Crick spread both arms toward the open country. “Government land. Or will be, by the time gentlemen finish objecting.”

Smith’s horse sidestepped under him. “You’re half a kilometre inside a leased frontage and you know it.”

“Leased,” Crick said. “There’s the old prayer. Leased from whom, for whose use, and by whose historical favour?”

The clerk on the tailgate lifted a plastic folder. “Applications entered under the Land Act.”

“Entered is not granted,” Doyle said.

“It’s enough to put a stake in the ground and a tremor in the squatter’s liver.”

Lyle, who had been scanning the shadow behind the nearest trailer, said, “Who’s that there.”

Jabez rose from where he had been crouched behind a stack of mesh panels. His hat was low and his grin worse than friendly. Across his knees lay a short shotgun.

Smith swore softly. “Take that gun away from him before I do.”

Crick lifted both hands. “He’s here to keep crows off the wheat. We are peaceful men.”

Doyle looked from the line of fresh pegs toward the crossing. “Peaceful men do not bring fencing crews before sunrise to settle a point not yet heard by a magistrate.”

“Peaceful men,” Crick said, “learn that if they wait for process, the water’s fenced off and the best grass is gone before justice saddles up.”

More vehicles came then in a wash of dust: Keene with four riders, and Barnes not in a buggy now but in an ageing government LandCruiser that looked as tired as the district. Eleanor Keene rode behind her father on a lean chestnut mare, gloved and erect and plainly uninterested in waiting at home while men misrepresented the world without her.

Barnes climbed out stiffly and took in the scene with one sweep of the eye. “Good God,” he said. “One asks for orderly attendance and receives a colonial parliament in high-vis.”

He set the terms at once. No more pegs advanced. No wire laid. No firearms uncased. Every claim to be heard at Reedy within the hour. Any man too foolish to wait could explain

himself to the constable at Swan Hill from a holding cell with worse coffee and fewer illusions.

That stopped them for the moment. Not because anyone respected process more than appetite, but because all of them wanted the advantage of appearing reasonable in public.

Reedy's forecourt was jammed by the time they arrived. Utes, horses, battered SUVs, dogs, tied trailers, and men clustered in argumentative knots as though the hearing had begun outdoors and merely needed a roof. Servants carried buckets to the horses. The sky had gone white with glare. Inside the homestead dining room, Barnes had turned the long table into a makeshift court.

Keene sat on one side with Eleanor behind him, Smith beside a station bookkeeper and a rolled pastoral map. Across from them sat Crick, his brother Sam, two selectors with weather-cut faces, the clerk, and Jabez looking less respectable indoors than out. Near the sideboard stood Adrian Fane, dressed a shade too well for the dust, as if he preferred trouble when it arrived with polished boots. Doyle, Callaghan, Lyle, Anna, and Beck kept to the rear until called.

Barnes tapped the table with his glasses. "We begin with the current stupidity and proceed to the older one if Providence dislikes us. Mr. Fane, you laid the first complaint. Make it plain."

Fane rose with polished grievance. His paperwork had been stolen, he said. Among the missing papers was a statement of grave importance concerning a death long rumoured and never properly examined. Keene, he implied, wished both the old truth

and the current frontage dispute buried under influence and old pastoral privilege.

Keene answered only that Fane had no right to the packet in the first place.

Barnes turned to Doyle. “You were present when this paper was discussed yesterday. What did you hear.”

Doyle stepped forward. “That Morrow, before he died, wrote of Mr. Keene in terms amounting to accusation; that Mr. Fane had obtained that writing; and that before it could be fully read, the packet went missing.”

“Did you see who took it?”

“No.”

“Did you see who profited?”

Doyle let the silence settle before answering. “Everyone who wanted confusion profited.”

Smith followed with harsher clarity. He had seen money change hands three nights before at the bridge store. Fane had financed Crick’s men. Fane denied it in tones that only made the truth sit more visibly in the room.

Then Eleanor said, very clearly, “Father, say it now. All of it.”

Keene stood. There was no theatre in him now, only fatigue and the long cost of something postponed too far.

Twenty years earlier, he said, Thomas Morrow had held a grazing license on rough country adjoining Keene’s first purchase. Augustus Fane, Adrian’s father, had gone in with Morrow on a horse venture. There had also been a bay mare, fast as

trouble and twice as costly. The quarrel over her had widened until it touched every other quarrel: frontage, debt, breeding rights, title, pride. During a storm, after warning had already come that the men were at it again, Keene rode late to Morrow's place. By the time he arrived, Morrow was down with a gunshot wound, Augustus Fane bloodied but standing, and the hut already catching at the rear wall.

Morrow had not yet died. He accused them both. He accused Keene most bitterly of having come too late.

"What did you do after?" Barnes asked.

Keene did not evade. "I gave evidence that made the fight mutual, the shot accidental, and the fire chance."

"And why."

"Because scandal would have wrecked the district's credit at the time, because Fane was one of my own class, and because I thought an ugly compromise better than public ruin."

Eleanor's face changed when he said it, not from surprise but from hearing the thing admitted plainly at last.

The room had just reached that terrible stillness where facts begin to outweigh positions when the commotion broke outside. Hooves. Shouts. A stable boy burst in breathless to say the bay horse mob was being driven through the lower reeds.

Everything moved at once. Smith was already on his feet. Keene reached the door first. Doyle felt Eleanor catch his sleeve long enough to warn him that if the horses turned into the mud he would lose half of them. Then she was gone to her own horse and the yard was all noise, reins, boots, and dust.

The country narrowed near the reeds, the ground turning black and deceptive under the grass. Ahead, the horse mob thundered through broken channels under the lash of panic and bad handling. Sam Crick drove from one side, Jabez from the other, with three mounted men behind them forcing the bay lot too hard toward the crossing.

Smith shouted to cut left and head them off. Doyle and Lyle took the high side. Keene and Smith came low. Beck and Callaghan drove in behind. Farther back, and coming harder than anyone liked, was Eleanor.

One of the lead horses stumbled. Another plunged to the chest in mud and screamed. Jabez fired a shotgun over his shoulder without looking, the shot shredding reeds and nothing else. Smith answered by shooting the dirt in front of Sam Crick's horse, enough to turn him and break the line.

Doyle reached the flank of the mob and stood in his stirrups, shouting until the front rank checked. Lyle came in from the other side using the stock-whip low and sharp. Beck rode like a man who saved trouble by refusing to share its panic. Little by little the horses began to wheel.

Then Jabez saw the dark bay colt with Rose's old ribbon still tied to the bridle and tried to rope him aside as if theft were a private amusement. The colt reared. The rope fouled. Jabez lost balance and went down hard. His gun vanished in the mud.

At nearly the same instant Doyle hit the bogged bay mare at the shoulder, dropped into black water to the knee, and hauled on the bridle while Lyle and Beck heaved from the flank. For one

long second the mare only sank deeper. Then the mud gave, and she came free in a crashing shower of black water and reeds.

“Behind you,” Eleanor shouted.

Doyle turned. Adrian Fane had ridden down after all, pistol in hand, white with a kind of gentlemanly desperation. He wanted Jabez protected because Jabez was still useful.

Smith levelled his carbine. “Drop it.”

Fane did not. Doyle came up out of the mud between them. Before the choice could ripen further, Barnes and the constable arrived with the rear of the chase. The constable kicked the pistol away. Jabez, half-drowned and split across the face, laughed once and told them all what Barnes had already guessed: Fane had paid to keep the district hot until Keene bled enough to bargain. Paid Crick to push the frontage. Paid Jabez to get the packet if he could. Said, Jabez added, that the past was only useful if it stayed half known.

When Barnes asked where the missing packet was, Jabez grinned through blood and mud and said, “Ask the child.”

Everyone turned at once. Rose stood back with Anna among the wagon-road crowd, clutching her rag doll as if the whole district had gone mad over toys. Doyle knew before she spoke that she had seen more than anyone had credited.

“I only kept it because men were shouting,” she said.

From a split seam in the doll she produced the oilskin packet, dry despite the chaos and no larger than a prayer book.

Back in the drawing room, with the curtains half-drawn against the glare and the room no longer a hearing but a

reckoning, Barnes unfolded the letter. Smoke had marked one edge. The hand inside was old and unsteady, but the meaning was not.

Thomas Morrow stated plainly that Augustus Fane had fired first. Morrow had struck him with a hame strap. They had fought over the mare, the frontage, and all the older lies between them. Keene had come late, too late, but he had not fired the shot and had not set the fire. If Keene later said otherwise, Morrow wrote, it would be to save Fane. If any man said Keene had killed him, that would be false. Keene's sin was not murder. It was pride, delay, and the expensive vice of protecting his equals.

The room changed shape around the reading. Keene stood in it without defence. Fane tried to call it the spite of a dying man, but the claim had no weight left in it. Eleanor spoke then with more steadiness than comfort, saying that her father had believed men like Morrow could be sacrificed to stability. Keene answered with a simple yes that landed harder than any speech.

Lyle, who had lived with the rumour of the old ruin and the old death as if both were part of the weather, said quietly that his people had been told for years it was all Providence and bad luck. Now they were hearing in daylight what had really been withheld. Barnes, who had little patience for self-serving eloquence, disposed of Fane and Jabez both with practical speed. The constable was to take them under complaint for incitement, unlawful assembly, and whatever other respectable wickedness could be written legibly before supper.

Crick made one final effort on behalf of the selectors, saying they starved while men like Keene rode over counties.

Barnes fixed him with a look that had probably subdued better men.

"You shall have your applications heard in proper course," he said, "and not by raid, theft, or melodrama. If a legal road and reserve can be cut without destroying existing improvements, it shall be. If not, then your poverty remains an argument, not a title."

By late afternoon the crowd had thinned to those who either mattered or could not bear to miss the ending. In the yard Keene spoke publicly and without flourish. Twenty years earlier, he said, he had given evidence that concealed the intent in Morrow's death. He had done it to protect Augustus Fane, to protect the district's credit, and because he had believed order more important than full justice when both could not be had. He had been wrong. He would sign the statement Barnes required and let the district do with it what districts always did.

No one applauded. Nothing so false. But the silence that met him was no longer the old one.

At sunset Barnes, the constable, Doyle, Lyle, and Callaghan stood by the lower crossing while a survey crew marked the new line. Every illegal peg had been pulled. In their place stood one fresh post with a strip of white survey tape tied to it and the designation COMMON PASSAGE entered formally on the map. No camp. No hut. No sly paddock named temporary and left for a generation. A road and water access, nothing more.

"Civilization," Callaghan said, watching the line go in, "always begins by disappointing both parties equally."

“That,” Barnes said, “is why it occasionally survives.”

Keene came to Doyle before leaving. The south bay lot would be sold off after all this, he said. Too many eyes on too little grass. There was a young dark bay among them that Doyle had looked at more than once. He could take the horse at cost if he wished, or refuse and preserve independence in its theatrical purity.

“At cost,” Doyle said, “is better than at sentiment.”

Keene accepted the answer with something like relief. He had written to Melbourne already, he said. The statement would go in the morning.

Back at Murrabit that night, the station resumed the old necessary tasks by which every crisis is finally measured. Horses fed. Dogs settled. A broken fence counted. A bruised man secured. Tea poured. Rose asleep at last with the rag doll and the empty seam. The room could contain its people again without immediate explosion, which in that district counted as peace.

Eleanor came over later with a copy of her father’s statement before it went to the press. It was plain, honest, and without ornamental excuse. She also said the old ruin would be fenced and marked in the morning. Not hidden. Not left as a place children could stumble into without knowing what had happened there.

Rose, half awake, asked whether the war was done.

“For today,” Eleanor told her.

That broke what remained of the strain. Even Callaghan poured her tea before she could refuse it.

At first light the next morning Doyle led the young dark bay from the lower yard. The horse tossed his head, suspicious of every human intention. Mist lay low over the flat. The lake beyond it was silver and seamless. Doyle put a hand on the horse's neck and told him he was expensive already and they had hardly spoken.

Eleanor was there again, mounted and watching from the road. She said the horse would carry only one man he respected.

"Then we are both in for a season of disappointment," Doyle said.

This time her smile reached the eyes.

They rode side by side toward the rise above the lake, where the country opened enough to show everything at once: the water, the reed margins, the mission cottage, the new road by the crossing, smoke from Reedy in the distance, and farther off the old ruin, fenced now and visible in the morning light. Not erased. Named.

"It seems quieter," Eleanor said.

"No," Doyle answered. "Only truthful."