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Memoirs of a Bastard Colonist
BEECHWORTH 1874
II
by
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CHAPTER 8

May, 1874 - Saturday

Beechworth, Victoria

The red and yellow coach-and-five trundled along the stony bush road to Beechworth, made slushy by puddles from the newly fallen late autumn rain. The driver was a middle-aged American who deftly handled a separate rein for each of the five horses. He had graciously and unexpectedly introduced himself at the beginning of the journey as Lucas Taylor from San Francisco and we reciprocated. From that time on, he addressed each of us by name.

Inside the dark coach, arranged on thinly padded wooden seats, were four women, two children and an elderly man all being jostled together with each bump and knock from the rutted road. I was pleased to be sitting on the carriage roof with the luggage arranged and strapped down around me and, huddled under my mackintosh and hat, I felt quite safe and cosy. My ribs were still sore but I had bound my chest tightly so that the jarring from the rough road caused me only some discomfort at times.

Next to Taylor sat a young man, Godfrey Saunders, most likely a clerk by his attire, who had paid a small 'gratuity' to be allowed to sit on the box seat with him. Had I the wherewithal, I would have done my best to outbid Godfrey Saunders but I was content enough up here. Garbed in my trousers and jacket, and having introduced myself as Robert Davies, rather than Rebecca, Taylor had assumed me to be an adolescent boy and allowed me to nestle on the roof, something Cobb and Co would not allow females to do.

This was far better than sitting in a dark, stuffy carriage with the only conversation being of children's illnesses, temperaments and mental aptitude, during this long haul. Up here, apart from some light rain, the air was fresh and the conversation interesting. Taylor was garrulous and kept up an incessant string of chatter with Saunders and me, even though I was not in any particular mood to be talkative.

We travelled at an average of around seven miles an hour and every fifteen to thirty miles or so, we changed horses for a fresh team. Each team was perfectly matched in colour and made a fine showing. Compared to train travel, where it was available, it was slow going but what little money I had left meant I had to economise and the railways were out of the question.

Our next change station was going to be just outside of Beechworth, nestled in the May Day Hills and along the Reedy Creek, which was as far as my money was allowing me to go. This township had grown considerably with the discovery of gold some twenty years before and now had settled into a stable country town determined to have a railway connection. I had to find some sort of employment there so I could continue my journey to Melbourne, and anonymity, some hundred and eighty miles away.

"What are your plans in Melbourne?" Taylor enquired of Saunders over the clatter and rumble of hooves and wheels.

"I'm to oversee our branch office in Elizabeth Street," Saunders replied.

"Married?"

"Not yet. My fiancée will join me once I've settled in and found a house."

"Ah, family. I have a boy in Bendigo just about his age," Taylor said referring to me. "And you, Robert," he said over his shoulder, "you're leaving us in Beechworth. What are your plans?"

Reluctantly, I replied, "Look for a job to pay for the rest of my fare to Melbourne."

"Not gold prospecting, then?" Taylor laughed, "Make a quick buck?"

"No. I wouldn't know how."

"Easy come, easy go," Saunders chimed in, "An honest day's work for an honest day's pay is the best way. There's really no other choice."

Saunders' rhetoric spurred me, "There's always a choice, Mr Saunders. Sometimes we have to choose something that may seem wrong to others."

Saunders half turned in his seat to face me, "You see, I don't believe that. Your path is predetermined by God. There's no choice. Whatever you do, God has chosen for you. You can't go against God's will."

"I disagree, Mr Saunders. God always gives you two choices. His will is the choice you make, not the other way around."

Taylor chuckled to himself, obviously enjoying the discussion.

Saunders persisted, "Are you saying, then, that God wills you to be bad?"

"No, you're saying that. I'm saying that you choose to be bad or good. You choose to be drunk or sober. You choose to hurt someone or love someone. Nobody makes you do anything except you—you have a choice; you make the decision. And it's the coward's way out to blame someone else for the choices you've made."

Taylor remarked, "It sounds like you're speaking from experience there, son."

Immediately, I felt that I had said too much; Saunders, however, was relentless and insisted, "No. I believe that our lives are predetermined by God and nothing you do will change that divine plan."

"You believe what you like, Mr Saunders, and I will follow my path, making a choice at each fork in the road."

The rear wheel hit a rather nasty bump and sent us all six inches into the air with squeals and gasps from the women and children, and a cry of pain from me.

Taylor called back, "Apologies, ladies!" then looked back to me to see if I was unharmed, "You okay there, son?"

"Yeah, I'm all right," I lied as my chest was still stinging from the jolt.

Taylor must have been concerned as he continued, "You say you need a job? Maybe I can help you, son. The German who runs the change station is always in need of help. I'll put in a good word for you."

"Thank you, Mr Taylor."

"You're welcome, son," and, as an aside to Saunders, I overheard him say, "Looks like he could use a good feed, too."

The few remaining miles to Beechworth were relatively smooth and uneventful and it was getting close to sunset. The thick bush was thinning out to pastureland and fenced paddocks and, in the distance, we could see the curling smoke from homesteads' chimneys scattered about. The evening air was filled with the distinctive scent of the eucalypt trees and the sounds of the bush birds, calling their last farewells of the day to each other. We were all weary from the long distance travelled that day and I, for one, was looking forward to a plate of warm food and a bed.

Taylor reached beneath his seat into the compartment of the fore boot and retrieved a bugle. He pursed his lips to the mouthpiece and blew a huge lungful of air through the instrument, emitting the most ear-piercing screech I had ever heard. The horses, rather than being frightened by it, seemed to be comforted by it perhaps knowing that rest for them was not far off.

Within a few minutes, we had reached our destination, the change station on the periphery of Beechworth. It was a collection of stone and weatherboard buildings, a few paddocks and a small cluster of fruit trees peeping from behind the main, double-storey building, which, I surmised, was the inn. This and the other buildings were not new but were well looked after. There was a kitchen attached to the inn with inviting aromas emanating from it—I was hungry. Another building close to the capacious stables was the stable hands' and groom's quarters. A chicken coop and a barn that housed a few goats, cows and sheep would have provided the family and guests with ample eggs, milk, cream, butter and cheese.

Taylor applied the brakes and gently reined in his five, "Whoa, whoa there boys!" and came to a stop between the stables and the inn.

From the stables, two young men ran out to greet the coach and take hold of two of the three lead horses to settle them.

At the same time, two women darted out from the inn toward the coach. They looked quite similar; one was older and the other most likely her daughter. Both were dressed neatly and cleanly, in clothing that suited hardworking women.

"Mrs Schwartzman!" called Taylor in an amiable tone.

“Mr Taylor,” the older woman called back, equally affably, “Herzlich willkommen!”

The coach door swung open and one of the young men quickly placed a small box at the door and assisted the ladies, children and elderly man from the coach as Taylor and Saunders climbed down from the box. I clambered over the luggage and threw aside my mackintosh and I, too, descended from the coach via the box.

I peered about me in the dim evening light and took in the freshness of the area while I stretched to relieve the compaction of sitting for so long.

Taylor made the introductions, “Ladies and gentlemen...and children...this is your hostess for the night, Mrs Schwartzman and her daughter, Hilda. You won’t find two lovelier ladies in all of Victoria. Or better food,” he added jovially.

Mrs Schwartzman openly flushed at the compliment and in a dense German accent replied, “Mr Taylor, you make me blush. But thank you and herzlich willkommen everybody. Hilda will take you inside and register you. Hot supper and warm bed is ready for you all.”

While I waited to see if Taylor could secure me a position with this company, I caught a glimpse of the two young stable hands as they unhitched the horses. They were sniggering to each other, looking at me and looking at Hilda. My attention diverted to Mrs Schwartzman’s daughter who, while ushering the other passengers into the inn, kept glancing toward me with a provocative, ‘come hither’ look. The youths found it quite amusing that Hilda should be paying me so much attention, attention I did not seek or desire.

“Son!” Taylor called to me, catching my attention. He gestured for me to join him and Mrs Schwartzman, “Missus, this young lad here, Robert Davies, is in need of employment and I reckon you could do with a spare pair of willing hands right now.”

Mrs Schwartzman appeared to be troubled by this request, “Mr Taylor,” she faltered, “Mr Schwartzman does all the hiring and he is in Melbourne presently with our son, Gerhardt.”

“Another reason to put young Robert on until the lord and master returns. Then he can decide to keep Robbie on or not. I’m sure he’ll do an excellent job even though he

don't look like much, eh?" he turned to me, "Eh, Rob? You'd do a good job, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, Sir. I worked in a hotel in Sydney all my life."

"*All of your life, you say?*" Taylor repeated with a touch of unintentional sarcasm. He turned to Mrs Schwartzman, "What do you say, Missus? Why not give the youngster a try? If he don't oblige then you can throw him on the next coach through here. Or under it. He won't be no trouble."

"I really don't know—"

"He's a good lad. And he's smart, too."

A long moment passed while Mrs Schwartzman considered her options. There was something that concerned her more than putting on a worker without her husband's approval; her concern went far deeper than that. Perhaps the looking-over that Hilda gave me and the amusement it caused the two stable hands had something to do with it. She was well aware that her two stable hands were struggling to manage the five horses and unloading the overnight baggage of the guests. Finally, she made a decision, "All right, Mr Taylor, I will give Robert a position here but only until Mr Schwartzman and Gerhard return in two days' time."

"Thank you, Missus. You won't regret it, I'm sure. Say thank you, Rob."

I obliged with a truly grateful, "Thank you," even though this whole situation didn't feel quite right.

Mrs Schwartzman directed, "Robert, since you will be a worker and not a guest, take your valises to the stablemen's quarters. Wolfgang and Daniel will show you which bed you can have. You can have supper with the guests for tonight but, tomorrow, you will eat with the staff. Mr Schwartzman will discuss wages with you when he returns. Is that suitable with you?"

I could only agree—the alternative was not feasible.

I took my two cases to the stable hands' cottage but decided to keep the case with my female attire and Harper's old revolver with me. It also held my Sarah's precious shawl and I didn't want to let that out of my sight.

In the warm and inviting dining room, my travelling companions had settled into little groups at various tables and were being served plentiful plates of stewed meat, vegetables and hot crusty bread. Tea and coffee were on offer for those of the temperate persuasion and beer and ale for the others.

Taylor sat alone at a table and was looked after by Mrs Schwartzman while Hilda attended to the other guests. I looked about for a spare table and must have appeared quite lost when Taylor spied me and invited me to join him, which I gladly accepted.

Once again, Hilda caught my eye but this time she was paying particular attention to Godfrey Saunders, quite overtly and scandalously flirting with him. Every now and then, she would glance over to me to see if I was watching but I tried my best to ignore her. Taylor noticed it all and commented between large mouthfuls of stew, “Don’t pay no heed to Hilda, son, her pa keeps her on a short lead and she tends to play around a bit when he’s away.”

“I won’t, Mr Taylor,” I replied breaking some bread and preparing to enjoy my meal, “I need this job more than I need any encumbrance.”

“Encumbrance,” Taylor chuckled, “That’s a mighty big word for such a young feller. You know how to spell it?”

“Yes.”

“I knew you were a smart one. What’s for you in Melbourne when you get there?” he quizzed as he took another scoop of stew into his mouth.

I paused as I reflected on the reason for my flight. “Nothing,” I replied indifferently, “I suppose this is my ‘grand tour’.”

“Well, you take care, Robert my boy. It’s a mean and nasty world out there and there are many who would take advantage of someone like you,” he advised most solicitously.

“Thank you,” I earnestly replied, “I will. I don’t intend letting anyone take advantage of me or those I care for.”

Taylor gave me a genuinely warm and fatherly smile and we ate the rest of our meal in companionable silence.

When supper was finished, the other guests sat and chatted or played games while I returned to the stable hands' quarters with my case. There, Wolfgang and Daniel were sprucing themselves up for a night on the town, this being Saturday night.

Wolfgang was the taller and of obvious Teutonic heritage being fair-haired and blue-eyed like I was. He spoke with a slight Germanic accent and it was quite probable that his position here was because of his parentage. Daniel, on the other hand, was a tawny-skinned, dark-eyed and dark-haired lad and spoke with a distinct colonial twang: a mixture of Cockney, brogue and Cornish, as all we currency lads and lasses did.

They were of that age between adolescence and adulthood where they looked like adults but behaved like children—and that's what all that sniggering was about.

Preening themselves in the small common mirror on the adjacent wall, Wolfgang addressed me through its reflection, "Coming to town with us? Do the block?"

Daniel chimed in, "Lots of girls," and giggled immaturityly.

"No," I replied, "It's been a long day. But thanks."

Wolfgang simpered, "Maybe girls don't interest you?" which caused Daniel to laugh boisterously and elbow Wolfgang with a knowing wink.

"Come on," Daniel urged Wolfgang.

"Don't wait up," Wolfgang advised as they both rollicked out by the only door to the quarters.

I did not know at the time what they were inferring: did they suspect me not to be male or that, if I were, I was a molly? I was too tired to try to work it out and, at that point, I really didn't care. I needed this job to earn some wages to get to Melbourne. "Keep your head down and keep out of trouble," I said to myself as I placed my valise on the bed and opened it. Lying on top was Sarah's shawl. I took it up and buried my face in it. It was only four weeks since that dreadful night. I was still mourning Sarah's passing and thought of her every day and prayed for her soul every night, asking for her forgiveness at the end of each prayer for all my broken promises.

I shook off my despair and replaced Sarah's shawl, closed the valise and stowed it under my bed. The other valise stood at the bed end together with my mackintosh and hat. Hefting the case onto the bed, I opened it and rummaged to find my night dress—a long

shirt—to change into. I uncovered Harper’s ancient revolver and the terrible images of that night, a little more than a week ago, rushed back. He had to pay for what he did and, if the law of the land failed, then... He had to pay. He did pay.

I buried the gun into the folds of my shirts and closed the case. Removing my jacket, I placed it neatly on the end of my bed and then removed my shirt. Sarah’s silver locket was around my neck and the bandages were still tight and firmly in place, wrapped around my chest from armpit to waist. I was a little concerned that the physical work in store for me tomorrow may cause me some grief but the thought of getting to Melbourne helped to firm my resolve.

“Why didn’t you go with Wolfie and Daniel?” Hilda’s low and husky query startled me and I turned to her and modestly held my night shirt up to my chest.

She approached me with a determined and suggestive look, “What happened?” she asked referring to my bindings.

“Ah...a horse threw me,” I lied.

Hilda chuckled, “That’s very honest of you, Robert. Most boys would say they had been in a fight and won.”

She was now a soft breath away from me. Hilda was about the same size as Sarah, a few inches shorter than me, her hair was light brown while Sarah’s was a lustrous dark auburn; Hilda’s eyes were hazel, Sarah’s a deep brown that I fell into every time I saw them. How different these two women were; how I missed Sarah.

Hilda must have wondered what I was thinking as she glanced from my eyes to my mouth, “Penny for your thoughts,” she whispered, her breath caressing my naked throat.

All I could do was shake my head slowly as words failed me.

Hilda chuckled again, “We have time,” she promised as she took a small step back and looked at the locket at my neck. She took it between her fingers and said, “Pretty. Your sweetheart’s?”

“Yes,” I answered as I gently prized it from her fingers and quickly put on my night shirt.

“Lucky girl,” Hilda retorted as she draped herself across my bed. “Mr Taylor said you’re smart. I suppose you read a lot. My father has lots of books. Maybe you’d like to read some of them? They’re mostly in German. But I could teach you.”

“I won’t be here that long.”

Hilda launched herself upright once more and sidled up to me, “Maybe you would stay if there was a good reason...?” and caressed my face with the back of her hand.

I wanted to push her away but I needed employment but, if I yielded to Hilda’s wanton needs, that, too, could see me expelled, so I did nothing. This was all Hilda needed and, without provocation or invitation, she captured my mouth with her lips.

She was not Sarah and while I needed comforting, I could not betray Sarah so soon and with someone so brash. Taking Hilda by the arms, I gently pushed her away. “I think you’d better go,” I said.

Hilda turned to leave and, half turning back, invited, “The library’s always open for you, Robert.”

We were up before dawn the next morning and out in the hitching yard after a quick breakfast of hot sweetened milk and bread. I don’t know what time Wolfgang and Daniel returned the night before but I was fast asleep when they did. Now we were all three hitching five chestnuts to the rails; the two stronger and larger polers in the back row and the three smaller pacers in the front row. The centre horse was the leader and was the most valuable to the driver as this horse was instrumental in steering the coach.

As we worked, Wolfgang gave me a backhanded compliment, “Looks like you know what you’re doing, Robert. Dan and I had a bet. I won.”

Daniel snarled a grunt of disappointment.

Wolfgang continued, “We saw Hilda come in after we left last night.”

Daniel interrupted, “She don’t waste no time that one. She’s fast. Did she ‘show you around?’”

“A word of warning, Robert, if her papa finds out—”

“You’re dead,” Daniel helpfully concluded.

“She doesn’t interest me,” I said in all honesty.

Daniel sniggered in his usual, annoying way, “That’s what we figured,” he ridiculed.

We had completed the harnessing when Taylor approached, paying particular attention to the centre lead horse but showed kindness and affection for all the horses in his care and control, “How’s it coming along, boys?”

“All ready, Mr Taylor,” Wolfgang answered as Taylor checked the rigging. Taylor’s appearance was followed by a straggle of some of the passengers, most of whom were still half asleep.

“Time to load up,” Taylor instructed Wolfgang, adding, “not you, Robbie. Best you give them ribs a chance to heal.”

“You can muck out the stables before church,” Wolfgang ordered as he and Daniel stacked the passengers’ overnight baggage onto the hind boot and the passengers arranged themselves in the coach.

The rakes, shovels and barrow were stowed just inside the stable doors in the tack room. Grabbing one of each, I went into the first of the empty stalls and began the arduous but necessary task of removing the horses’ night soil and replacing the straw with a clean covering. There were twenty stalls in all, twelve of which were still occupied and whose tenants would be removed to the paddock by Daniel once the coach had departed.

The sun was just breaking over the horizon and it was going to be a beautifully sunny autumn day. Laughing jackasses and lorikeets were all around, calling and screeching their morning overtures. The coach was ready to depart but for one passenger: Godfrey Saunders.

Taylor went inside the inn to hurry him along when he saw Saunders and Hilda in a cosy tête-à-tête in a far corner. Knowing Hilda and her overt flirtatiousness, it was obvious to him why Saunders was late.

“Mr Saunders,” Taylor called, “we’re ready for you, if you’d care to join us.”

The unwelcomed disruption to their hushed and very private conversation caused Hilda to scowl and Saunders to ashamedly jump to attention, “Righto, Mr Taylor,” he offered, “just finalising my account with Miss Schwartzman.” Saunders made his farewells

to Hilda and scurried past Taylor who stood, hands on hips, in silent admonition. He shook his head at Hilda who turned and left in a huff, nose in the air.

With the loading of the coach complete and the baggage properly stowed and secured, Wolfgang and Daniel returned to the stables to begin moving the spare horses into the paddock. Saunders sheepishly emerged from the inn, followed a few steps behind by Taylor, and both climbed onto the box seat. Taylor settled in and took up the reins just as Mrs Schwartzman came from the kitchen annex to farewell her itinerant guests and Taylor—something she always did, come rain or shine. Taylor had nothing but admiration for her and what she had to endure. He could not say the same for her husband, a bully of a man, nor his son, a milksop, nor his daughter, a trifler to say the kindest of her.

With a click of his tongue and a gentle flick of the whip, the coach resumed its rattling, bone-shaking journey to Melbourne.

Mrs Schwartzman returned to her cooking duties and the dust from the coach's wheels had barely settled when, from the north, four horsemen clip-clopped toward the inn. They and their horses were bedraggled, scruffy and quite weary having travelled most of the night. The four riders were unshaven and wore their wide-brimmed hats low over their eyes. Two displayed a holstered sidearm just visible from their opened oilskin dusters; all had rifles strapped to their saddles or in carpetbags or bed rolls. They may have been stockmen on their way to a new job but they certainly appeared to have lived a hard life on the road.

Pulling up ten yards or so from the inn's doorway, they looked about surveying the lay of the land. "This'll do," the leader announced as he dismounted, removing his carpetbag and sleeping roll. The rest followed suit.

The leader was Johnson, about late middle-age with a snarly, leathery, weather-beaten face that didn't invite sympathy in any form. He wasn't terribly tall but certainly taller than two of his compatriots, Tanner and Pitt. The younger of these two, Pitt, was baby-faced and in his mid-twenties. He sported a sparse blondish beard and hair that spiked from beneath his hat like straw. Tanner was wiry and about the same age as Johnson and his feral, wide-eyed look and toothy, crooked grin would have sent shivers down the spine of even the bravest of men.

The last man was Percy, tall, brawny, swarthy and stern but did not display any arrogance or malevolence, only wariness. He was half-caste Aborigine and, while he was as dishevelled as the other three, his attire was altogether of a better quality than theirs.

After a final visual reconnaissance of the surrounds, Johnson handed Percy his horse's reins and, indicating the stables, ordered, "Give them a rub down and a feed." Tanner and Pitt handed their reins to Percy with a smirk and followed Johnson into the inn.

Hilda had repositioned herself behind the registration counter and was busily doing nothing but daydreaming and doodling when the three unkempt wayfarers strolled in, scrutinising every corner of the room. Aware of the imposition on her valuable time, Hilda looked up and was jolted to attention when she caught sight of them.

"Ah...yes...good morning...gentlemen," she stuttered.

Johnson leaned his elbow on the desk and uttered, "Morning, Miss. Me and me lads need a couple of rooms for a couple of nights."

Hilda hesitated.

"Is there a problem?" Johnson enquired, "You don't seem to be run off your feet."

"Ah, no. No problem. Sorry. How many? Three?"

"Four. And four horses."

With some reluctance, Hilda pushed the registration book to Johnson who inked the pen and began writing as Hilda tried being cordial, "Here on business?"

"Yeah."

"To do with the mines?"

"Yeah." This response from Johnson made Tanner let out a squeal of a giggle, which earned him Johnson's glare.

"Where are you headed?" Hilda nosily questioned.

Pitt, seeing a chance to obtain some 'extra service', replied tactlessly, "Myrtleford. Want to come with me?"

This earned Pitt a deathly glare from Johnson. Pitt immediately took a step back, eyes downcast.

Hilda smiled and persisted with her innocent interrogation, "Are you assayers?"

Tanner stifled a laugh. This annoyed Johnson who cut the conversation short, “How much, Miss?”

“Ah...a shilling for each bed and sixpence for each horse, two nights, twelve shillings, please. Breakfast’s included but not dinner.”

I was up to my sixth stall and barrow-load and not looking forward to the remaining fourteen now that Wolfgang and Daniel had moved the horses to the back paddock. I don’t know where they’d got to but I was by myself with this task and my ribs were starting to complain.

The sound of an abrupt “Hey, boy,” caught my attention and I turned to see the silhouette of a tall man holding onto four horses in the doorway of the stables.

“Yes?” I queried.

“Can you take care of these animals? Feed and water. And a rub down.”

“Sure,” I said as I dropped my rake with pleasure and joined the man, taking the reins from him, “You staying here?”

“Yeah. A couple of nights.”

It was then that I realised this man was aboriginal and some sort of reaction must have registered on my face; he added, “Is there a problem?”

“No,” I said, “Sorry. Are you a full blood?”

He looked at me suspiciously; I explained, “I’ve never met a full blood before. I’m down from Sydney.”

The man relaxed and even gave a faint smile, “Nah. Half. My father was a white fella.” He added, “You?”

I looked at him nonplussed; I was white, blond and blue-eyed. Then his big toothy grin revealed that he was larking, so I responded, “I don’t even know who my father was. So I could be.”

He laughed and that made me laugh.

“Well, this is a fine establishment,” he said, “I don’t know if I want to stay in a place that lets a boong and a bastard in!” He looked at me and held out his hand, “Percy.”

I took it and shook hard, “Robert.”

“Robert the muckraker. Been working here long?”

“First day. Saving to go to Melbourne.”

“Someone waiting for you there? Fiancée? Wife?”

“No! I just turned eighteen!”

“Don’t get hitched too soon,” he earnestly advised, “They can be a millstone, wife and kids.”

From near the inn came a loud, “Hey! Perce!” interrupting our cordiality.

Percy turned to him and replied, “Tanner. What do you want?”

“Get your black arse over here!” The man who approached us had a face that would scare the freckles off a highlander. Tanner was as ugly as the pile of fresh excrement in my barrow and the contents of my barrow actually smelt better than he did.

He looked me over and said to Percy, “You like the white fella, eh, Perce? Taste better than black fellas?”

“Shut up, Tanner.” With an apologetic look thrown back to me, Percy led Tanner back into the inn.

Diverting my attention from that curious transaction to the four horses in hand, I realised that, while they were tired and dirty, these four mounts were actually of high quality; one was even a thoroughbred. I thought it unusual for four men of that calibre to have four horses of this calibre.

Leading the horses toward the newly mucked out stalls, I realised that one of the saddles still had the bags and rifle tied on.

When I reached the inn with the rifle, carpetbag and sleeping roll, I found Hilda arguing with Johnson, “You didn’t say one of you was a...a—”

“Boong?” Johnson offered.

Tanner sniffed the air and remarked sarcastically, “Is that what it is?”

“Shut up, Tanner.” Johnson turned to Hilda, “His money not good enough for you?”

“It’s just... my father doesn’t want blacks in here. Or Chinese.”

Johnson conceded, “I can understand Chinks—”

“Maybe he can sleep in the stables,” Hilda suggested.

This wasn't the Christian thing to do. I had to say something. "He's not an animal, Hilda." I gave the carpetbag to Percy, "You left this."

"Robert! This is none of your concern."

"I'll wager that even your German bible says that humans were made in God's image. Who's to say He wasn't black?"

"That's sacrilege!"

"Or a woman, for that matter," I added.

Percy addressed Hilda directly, respectfully and eloquently, taking her by surprise, "I assure you, Miss, I won't be any trouble to you. I left my nulla-nulla and spears in my humpy back in Bathurst."

Hilda was wavering; she didn't know what to do. Perhaps they would be gone before her father returned. "Two days," she warned Johnson, "Only two days." She would explain to her mother who surely would understand, especially since she, too, had made a decision without first consulting the head of the family. She turned to me, "I do this for you, Robert Davies. You owe me."

The threat was implicit. I only hoped that, when the time came to service my debt, I'd have enough saved to leave for Melbourne.

One final indignation for Percy was the rider Hilda added, "You can stay. But use the back door. Please."

During the course of that Sunday, I discovered that Wolfgang and Daniel, once they had paddocked the coach horses, told Mrs Schwartzman they were off to church and I didn't see them at all for the rest of the day. I was given a few more chores to complete before I, too, attended mass and, apart from soreness, I didn't mind at all as it gave me the opportunity to show I was a willing worker...and it kept Hilda at bay.

After resting for most of the day, the four horsemen took to the saddle again and rode off to the west, toward Wangaratta, and returned just as the sun was shedding its last rays for the day.

The next morning, Wolfgang and Daniel, having returned late the night before, were still soundly sleeping as I rose. It was just before dawn; I had had a long and deep sleep, and now wanted to have a thorough wash, in private and uninterrupted. The little lavatory attached to the quarters was lockable and didn't have any windows so I was confident I could carry out my ablutions undisturbed.

With my valise in hand, I locked myself in and stripped off, removing the bindings from my chest. The bracing, icy water felt good as I cleansed my body and wondered how I would conceal my “you-know-whats”, as Patrick delicately put it, when the time came. I quickly dried off and rebound my chest if only to hide my breasts, for the discomfort of my mending ribs had lessened somewhat.

A fresh shirt and half-stockings made me feel new; I would wash the discards later. I was now ready for the new day.

A coach was expected late in the afternoon and all was in readiness for it. By midday, the three of us had mucked out the stables, fed and watered all the horses including the four belonging to the ‘assayers’, polished up the tack and were ready for a break and a light repast. Wolfgang and Daniel headed off for the kitchen while I prepared to do my laundry by gathering up my discarded clothing I'd left in the quarters.

“We have a laundress, you know.”

Hilda startled me—she certainly was stealthy and I was annoyed, “Don't you ever knock?”

“Why? What do boys do when no one's watching?” Her smirk told me she knew very well what boys did when no one was watching.

“What do you want, Hilda? I'm busy.”

“You owe me.”

I didn't expect the piper would want payment so soon, “So what do you want?” I threw back.

“You know what I want,” she whispered as she cornered me.

“If your pa finds out—”

“Are you going to tell him?” Her breath once more caressed my throat.

“You might be the one who's sorry,” I warned enigmatically.

“Try me.” Her voice trailed off as she pressed her body against me and pushed her mouth against mine.

Against my wishes, my body responded to her insistence and, aware that she would be seeking a reaction from my nether regions—a reaction that would not be forthcoming—I raised my thigh to press against her pubis and avoid discovery. My mouth and hands, however, took hold of her and our tongues fought for supremacy while my hands fondled and stroked every part of her body they could reach.

Within a few short seconds, we were breathless and broke our kiss. Hilda’s hands reached for my belt; I quickly took hold of them and warned, “No.”

“I want to see. I want to touch,” she pleaded trying to free herself from my grip.

“No. I’ll give you what you want but not that way.”

Hilda looked at me, puzzled, then realised what I was offering and smiled wantonly.

“The bed,” I ordered, equally as wantonly as she had, as I guided her to it. She lay herself down on it, her gaze never leaving me. I climbed onto the bed and knelt beside her, my hand finding its way up the inside of her leg and to its destination. Her breath became laboured and the pupils in her eyes dilated. I imagined her to be Sarah and that this was the culmination of our love for each other, a love we never had the chance to consummate.

Hilda’s eyes closed in rapture as I gently probed and began the repayment of my debt. With each ministration, Hilda’s breath became more rapid and with each breath, my ministrations became more determined until she stopped breathing altogether and I felt a tightening. She finally expelled a long, laboured exhalation and I withdrew.

“Oh, Robert,” she sighed, “I have never felt that before.”

All I could do was gaze at Hilda in awe; this was the first time I had made love to another woman or, in fact, to anyone else, and I was bewildered by its effect on me. How I wished it had been Sarah. Tears welled in my eyes and I quickly turned away before Hilda noticed.

The rumble of a horse and cart roused us, followed by Mrs Schwartzman frantic calls, “Hilda! Hilda! Dein Vater ist zu Hause!”

Hilda sprang off my bed and adjusted her skirts and mumbled, quite irritated, “He wasn’t supposed to be back until tomorrow,” then hurried out, leaving me in a state of perplexity and confusion.

Through the window, I could see a heavily laden cart pulled by a solitary, overworked Clydesdale, driven by an older, potbellied man and a youth, whom I assumed to be Hilda’s father and brother. The only resemblance they bore to each other was the colour of their hair and eyes: blond and blue, except the older man’s hair was grizzled. They were otherwise chalk and cheese in appearance and demeanour.

Hilda ran to her mother’s side and, Mrs Schwartzman seeing from where Hilda had come, asked in a hushed tone, “Was hast du da drin gemacht?”

“Nothing, Mama.”

“Du weißt, was dein Vater tun wird, wenn er findet,” she warned her daughter.

“There wasn’t anyone in there, Mama.”

Mrs Schwartzman, defeated, sighed, “Was soll ich mit dir machen?”

Having heard both the cart’s clattering and Mrs Schwartzman’s calls, both Wolfgang and Daniel raced out, munching on the final bites of their meal. I thought it best not to appear shy so I walked out from the quarters and joined the greeting party much to Mrs Schwartzman’s surprise and disappointment that Hilda had lied to her.

The cart trundled to a stop close to Mrs Schwartzman who was happy to see her husband and son, in a restrained way, “Herman, es ist so schön, dich zu Hause zu haben. Hat dir Melbourne gefallen, Gerhard?”

Gerhard was the same age as Patrick, I guessed, and replied to his mother with controlled enthusiasm, “Yes, Mama, it’s a big city.”

“Ich habe dich erst morgen erwartet, Liebes,” she said to her husband.

Schwartzman tone was as gruff as his exterior and, with a guttural German tone replied, “We had to push on and beat the weather before it flooded the river. Und speak English, Ursula.”

He only then noticed his daughter and his bearish behaviour changed appreciably, “Schatzi!” he called as he climbed down from the cart and engulfed his daughter in a smothering hug.

Hilda, struggling to breathe, asked, “Papa, did you bring me something from Melbourne?”

He let go of his daughter and reassured her, “All in good time, Schatzi, all in good time.” Looking around he soured again and addressed his workers, “What do you want? An invitation?” This spurred them into action and they began unloading the provisions from the cart. I expected to be introduced so I waited. Gerhard, all this time, had been watching me, his face unreadable.

Schwartzman looked at me and asked his wife, “Who is that?”

Mrs Schwartzman, most reluctantly and almost apologetically replied, “Oh, that is Robert Davies. He needed a job...Mr Taylor...He’s a good worker, Herman.”

“No, we don’t need anyone more.”

“Mr Taylor recommended him. It is only for a short time. He needs to earn his fare to Melbourne.”

Schwartzman shook his head in disapproval, then looked at Gerhard. He leaned toward his wife and said, “Not the sort of boy I want around Gerhard.”

She was stunned, “I am sure you are mistaken, Herman.”

Hilda agreed, “He’s not like that, Papa. He has a sweetheart. In Sydney. He is not like that,” she reiterated firmly.

Like what? I asked myself.

Schwartzman was in a quandary, “Hmm. Boy,” he addressed me, “any trouble and you are out? Understand?”

“No trouble, Sir,” I reassured the old despot, giving Hilda a look that conveyed that I was not about to jeopardise my employment there.

He emitted a grunt and gave me a warning look as Mrs Schwartzman linked her arm in his and led him toward the inn, “You must be starving.” Addressing her son with a backward glance, “Gerhard. Come.”

Gerhard jumped from the cart’s seat and followed his parents. He, too, gave me a look that made me shiver but for a different reason. It was then that I realised what Gerhard was all about. What was it with this family? I felt unsafe and trapped.

Hilda was the last to join the procession to the inn. She gave me an enigmatic smile and advised, “You’d better take your lunch in the kitchen...if you’re still hungry.”

Inside the inn, in the area set aside as the dining room, all the tables were vacant save one which accommodated Johnson and two of his companions, Pitt and Tanner. They had helped themselves to the limited-in-variety but plentiful-in-supply offerings on the buffet table and were devouring their selections in their usual slovenly manner.

The family came in and Schwartzman, seeing the three, asked of his wife, “Business good?”

Mrs Schwartzman, relieved that Percy was not present—she wanted to delay that explanation for as long as possible—replied, “Yes, Liebes, these...gentlemen are assayers but will be leaving us today.”

Schwartzman turned the registration book to him and grunted with approval as he scanned the pages, “When is the coach due?”

“Half past four,” Hilda replied, “Everything is ready for them. Robert is a good worker, Papa.”

“Well see, Schatzi, we’ll see.”

Gerhard had made his way to the buffet table and dished up a portion for himself well aware that he was being watched by three pairs of eyes as they scoffed their food. He took himself to the table furthest away from them and ate. This amused the trio, Tanner in particular.

Much to Mrs Schwartzman’s dismay, Percy descended the stairs from the rooms upstairs and approached the desk with a letter in hand. Addressing Hilda, he requested, “Do you have a penny stamp, Miss. I have a letter to post.”

Schwartzman’s face reddened when he saw Percy and took his wife by the arm, pulling her into the corridor leading to the kitchen annex.

In the kitchen annex, I had helped myself to some sliced beef and buttered bread and pondered my fate. The intrusion on my contemplation brought my attention to corridor where Schwartzman interrogated his wife, “Why is that black in my hotel?”

Mrs Schwartzman, flustered, reverted to her native tongue, “Liebling, er ist ein guter Mann. Sauber—”

“English!”

“He is very clean, Herman. And polite. He and his friends will be gone today. Please. Remember what the constable said.”

“Why do I leave you in charge? And you give me a useless son! I can’t take my eye off him for a minute! Argh!”

She stood there, visibly shaken, and watched his back as he stormed off.

The anger displayed by this man and the treatment of his wife brought back painful memories and I felt deep empathy for this mentally abused woman but this situation was something she and her family had to overcome. I was not about to involve myself. My future was in Melbourne.

I finished my lunch and quaffed a glass of water ready to resume earning my wages.

It was midafternoon, a coachload was expected in a few hours and the ‘assayers’ would be leaving us soon. Wolfgang and Daniel were still sorting, stacking and storing the provisions from the cart in the forecourt and I was assigned to the stables and the preparation of the fresh horses for the coach.

Gerhard, having finished his lunch, came out to give a hand with the provisions when he noticed me in the stables. Making his excuses to Wolfgang, he strolled over to the tack room then, with a precautionary look outside, came to the stall I was.

Catching my attention, he said as I rubbed down one of the dappled greys, “Hilda told me all about you.”

This was a statement I wasn’t going to expand upon, “Oh?” I said impassively.

“She said you are from Sydney and you have a sweetheart.”

“Did she also tell you that I don’t want any trouble?”

He laughed, “You’re already in that, my friend, if my father finds out.”

I moved around to the other side of the horse and brushed the offside leaving Gerhard in the vacuum of my indifference.

He followed me around, “I don’t believe it,” he continued, and waited for a reaction. “I don’t believe you fucked my sister,” he clarified.

My only reaction was a sideways glance, which was enough for him to continue, “I know what you are.”

This last statement did elicit an unexpected response from me: an unbidden gasp.

He sidled up close to me and whispered, “Dan and Wolfie won’t have her so she wants you. But you’re like me, aren’t you, Robert Davies?” He put his hand on my shoulder and slid it down to my hip.

“Don’t fool yourself, Gerhard, I’m nothing like you.”

I pushed the back end of the horse away from me so I could get out of the stall and left the little molly there. I remember thinking that I had left two horse’s arses in that stall that day.

A few paces out of the stall stood Percy. The disappointed look on his face told me he had overheard the conversation. I was angry that Hilda told her brother; I was angry that he assumed he knew me; I was angry that my life had become so complicated; but I wasn’t angry with Percy. I calmed myself and addressed my aboriginal friend, “Percy. I suppose you heard?”

All he did was raise an eyebrow apologetically.

“I’m not like that,” I reassured my friend.

“It doesn’t matter to me if you are, Robert. You’re a decent fellow. Even if you are not the manliest of men,” he chuckled and smiled broadly, “Don’t let those who don’t know you rattle you, boy. You just be the best you can be and that’s all anyone can expect of you.” He laid a reassuring hand on my shoulder, “Now, to business. We’ll be heading off just before the coach comes. Have our horses ready to go by then, all right?”

“All right.”

“By the way, where’s the post office? I have this letter for my wife.”

“I’ll take it for you.”

“Thank you,” he said, handing me the stamped envelope, which I dutifully put it in my jacket pocket.

“Hey! You! Boy!” was Schwartzman’s rude and abrupt demand, “I don’t pay you to stand around and talk all day. Get back to work!”

I wondered just how long I had to put up with this before I had enough cash to get to Melbourne.

The few hours that followed had me helping Wolfgang move stock into the storeroom and, thankfully, out of the surveillance of both Hilda and Gerhard. One week of this and I'll be gone, I reassured myself.

The time came to saddle Percy and his mates' horses, my job as Wolfgang and Daniel were readying for the coach.

I entered the first stall and saddled and bridled Percy's mount, checking that the girth was not too tight and the channel and gullet sat in the right position. Content with that, I moved to the next stall, to the third and, finally the fourth, completing the tacking up of each horse quickly.

Leaving the final stall, I was horrified to see Gerhard in the adjacent stall, watching me intently as he was very obviously masturbating.

"Come here," he ordered in a husky tone, "I want to show you something."

I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Come here, I said!" His insistence resulted in more feverish activity as he braced himself against the railing. "I'll tell my father about you and Hilda..."

I reluctantly moved into his stall and watched as he rubbed his phallus roughly back and forth. "Come here...Finish me...And I'll do you."

I wasn't shocked or disgusted; I was furious and outraged that he should put me in this situation, "Put it away, Gerhard. I'm not interested."

"You are. I can tell. Come here!"

I stood my ground.

"Come here, I said!" he repeated angrily and unexpectedly lunged at me, grabbing me by the arms and pushing me against the railings. He pressed his body against mine. I writhed and pushed him off; he staggered backward, losing his balance and hitting the railings on the opposite side of the stall. Before I could move out, he regained his equilibrium and grabbed my shirt and hurled me against the rails again, my ribs taking the brunt of the impact, doubling me over in pain. I was momentarily incapacitated. Gerhard

saw his chance and pulled me up and spun me around and slammed me, face up against the rails, his body pinning me there.

“Get off me! Let me go! You bastard, let me go!” I yelled as I struggled to free myself.

“You want it! You know you want it!” he spat in my ear as his hands quickly pulled down my braces and reached for the buttons of my fly.

“I’ll kill you!”

He tore my fly open and pulled my trousers down. I could feel his erect penis pushing against my buttocks as he fumbled to pull down my drawers.

“No! Let me go, you bloody mongrel! Let me go!” I yelled, tears forming in my eyes.

Suddenly, Gerhard released me. I turned to see Schwartzman, seething, snarling at Gerhard whom he had pulled off me and flung across the stall. In an instant, he turned on me, “Get out! Get your belongings and get out of here!”

“Papa...” Gerhard’s feeble plea as he pulled his clothes together, attracted more venom.

“You, shut up!”

I pulled up my trousers and tried to appeal to Schwartzman, “It wasn’t my fault. He attacked me!”

“I told you to get out!”

“You owe me wages,” I whimpered, suddenly feeling desperate and powerless.

“There’s nothing owing!”

“Two days,” I said, sounding more like an appeal than a demand.

“You’re lucky I haven’t broken your face. Now get out of my sight. Now!”

There was no reasoning with this vile human. I angrily wiped the tears from my face and stumbled out of the stall and into the forecourt, righting my dishevelled clothing as I headed for the stable hands’ quarters.

By the time I’d reached the door, the full realisation of the ramifications of what had just happened hit me. No money, no friends, nowhere to go and I had almost been violated

in the most brutal of ways. Self-pity and despair overcame me; me legs gave way and I fell back against the wall and slid to the floor, the tears starting up again.

I didn't see the shadow loom over me but I heard the rough voice admonishing me, "That ain't no way for a man to behave."

I looked up to see the repulsive face of Johnson sneering at me. I was angry and didn't care for any criticism.

"What's it to you?" I barked back, angrily wiping my face and getting to my feet.

"I heard what the old Hun bastard said. Maybe I can help." I stared at him, daring him to continue. "There's five quid in it for you."

"That's a lot of money."

"Do you want it or not?"

I considered my options. None. Maybe Godfrey Saunders was right.

"Yeah," I said, "I want it."

Johnson's three cohorts were playing cards in Johnson's room in the inn when Johnson returned and made the announcement, "We're set."

"Who'd you find?" Tanner quizzed with an evil smirk on his twisted features.

"The molly boy."

"The owner's son?"

"Nah, the other one. Robert," Johnson confirmed, bringing an onset of cackling from both Tanner and the younger Pitt. Percy, on the other hand, was alarmed and most concerned.

With renewed optimism—and a little trepidation—I spent the rest of my afternoon in the quarters packing my few belongings and reliving the journey that brought me to this time and place. I pondered each and every decision I had made and, without exception, I would not have made a different choice if I had the time over. Were they God's will or mine? Was this God's will now? Would I be able to live with the outcome? What was the adage about being hanged for a sheep as a lamb?

A gentle knock on the door caught my attention and before I could say anything, the door slowly opened.

“May I come in?” Hilda timidly asked.

“What do you want, Hilda?” was my terse and unwelcoming reply.

“Mama told me what happened. I just want to say I’m sorry, Robert. I didn’t mean to—”

“Why did you tell your brother?”

“I...I just wanted to see if—”

“I liked boys or girls? I like girls, Hilda, girls,” was my truthful yet ironic reply.

“I didn’t know he’d do that.”

“Do what? Your brother rape me or your father fire me? I needed this employment, Hilda, you knew that, yet you chose to play games. With my life.”

Hilda slowly approached me, “I am so sorry, Robert. Please forgive me.” She did sound truly sorry but I was not in the forgiving mood. I forcefully grabbed her in a tight embrace and violently assaulted her mouth with mine, for it wasn’t a kiss, it was an aggressive invasion; she practically swooned. I let go of her and pushed her away.

“Did you like that, Hilda?” I asked her, mocking her reaction, “Did you?”

I picked up my jacket, mackintosh and two red leather valises and headed for the door, leaving her in my wake, mouth agape. At the door, I turned and let her know, “I’m like you, Hilda.”

CHAPTER 9

The Set Up

I left Hilda in the stable hands' quarters to ruminate my last statement. While I had been packing up my hopes and belongings, Percy returned from Beechworth town with an aged hack and even more aged saddle for me to ride. As I strapped my two valises onto the horse's flanks, Johnson, Tanner and Pitt joined us on the horses I had tacked up earlier. They, too, were clearing out.

We left along the western road just as we heard the bugle announcing the arrival of the late afternoon coach a short distance behind us. I wondered what those travellers would make of that flawed family I left behind.

We travelled well into the night westward toward Wangaratta taking bush tracks instead of the main road and finally made camp at a small billabong obscured by tall gums from any road. Throughout the whole journey here, no one said a word to me and what was spoken between them, was spoken in hushed tones. Even Percy kept his thoughts to himself and frequently shot me a glance and a rueful smile. I knew what I had agreed to do and I was prepared to do it. I needed the money; all would go well, I reassured myself. No one would be hurt.

It was an icy night and the campfire and my mackintosh did their best to keep me warm but I hadn't eaten since lunch and I was hungry and cold. Johnson and his boys had come prepared with a pack of cold food but I was too proud to beg for some so I sat

huddled in my mac against an old gum and watched the group squatted by the fire, sharing the pack.

Percy looked over to me and rose to his feet with his share of the food. “You want some?” he said offering me some of his food.

I looked up at him and then to Johnson and the other three. Percy insisted, “Don’t mind them. This is from my share. Take it.”

I took the offering, “Thank you, Percy,” and didn’t waste a crumb.

The next sensation I had was of my feet being kicked.

“Get up,” Percy urged, “We’re moving out.”

It was daybreak and, what I could see of the sky, it was cloudless and promised to be a sunny day. I roused myself as Johnson, Tanner and Pitt were dousing the campfire by urinating on it.

We saddled up and headed for the predetermined place about ten miles west of Beechworth.

They left me perched on the top of one side of a low rocky alluvial valley, keeping a lookout. The valley was only relatively short—about five hundred yards—and the compacted sandy road that ran through it connected the lower plains on either side of the rocky outcrop that extended several miles in either direction. This rutted, boulder-strewn part of the road was the most direct way between the two townships of Wangaratta and Beechworth, about twenty-four miles apart.

I left my poor old hack at the foot of the rise, in the shade of the scrubby gums that dotted the stony area, discreetly tethered to one of them. I could not see Percy and his boss, Johnson, or his mates, from my position but I guessed they could see me.

So I sat and waited and watched the road, the warm sun on my face—at least, it wasn’t raining.

After an interminable length of time, I saw some movement at the far end of the valley, to the east. They’re here! Time to earn my five pounds!

I scrambled down the blind side of the rise and, as instructed, tossed myself onto the ground and rolled about, soiling my clothes, face and hands and lay there, holding my leg and moaning.

It wasn't five minutes before the leader of the convoy came into view. I was staggered to see that this was not the small gang of bushmen that Johnson had told me had robbed them but a large company of troopers escorting a wagon. This wasn't a reckoning, this was a robbery! This was not the easy five quid Johnson promised. I was dead scared. These twenty or so troopers were not a small gang of mismatched miscreants but a well-trained body of soldiers who knew how to kill.

The leader was a sergeant and, upon seeing me, raised his hand and called, "Halt!" to his escort. He scanned the valley walls apprehensively and ordered, "Weapons at the ready!" and drew his pistol as I writhed about as I was told to do.

The sergeant warily urged his mount toward me, his gun trained on me. "You there," he called, stopping some ten yards away, "Hands where I can see them."

I complied by showing him that I was unarmed. He continued, "What's the matter with you?"

My mouth and throat were dry through fear but I managed to continue with the ruse as I lay on my back, "A big brownie...My horse skittered...I think I've broken my leg..."

The sergeant suspiciously glared at me then looked around once more and saw my horse a short distance off. With consternation and some reluctance, he called back to his men, "Hold there. Stay alert," then dismounted and strode the few paces toward me.

"Let's look at your leg, laddie," he said as he holstered his gun and bent down to inspect my leg. The instant he touched my leg, I groaned loudly feigning extreme pain.

The sergeant looked at me with concern and said, "I can put you in the wagon and take you as far as Wangaratta."

"Thank you," I whispered, fearful of what was about to happen.

The sergeant turned to his troop and ordered, "Bring the wagon up!" and stood up. The soldiers did as ordered and, confident of their safety, holstered their weapons.

The wagon was only a few yards away from me and the entire convoy completely within the valley when a single shot rang out. The sergeant crumpled to the ground beside me, blood streaming from a gaping wound to his head, dead.

The troopers jumped to alert, guns drawn. One trooper, a corporal, called out, “A trap!” and with wild fury levelled his gun at me but, before he could fire, was shot and he fell from his horse. This was the beginning of the massacre; one by one, the troopers were cut down by unseen gunmen. Horses, too, were not spared. When the wagon driver attempted to race away, one of the four horses was felled. The driver wasn’t spared either.

I watched all this in horror; the shooting didn’t stop until all the soldiers had fallen. A few of the spared horses bolted.

Then all fell silent.

Slowly, I staggered to my feet and took in the carnage with horror.

A shot rang out. It whizzed past my head! Then another! They were shooting at me! I dropped to the ground partially obscured by the Sergeant’s body and curled up, making myself as small a target as possible. Another two shots rang out just missing me but hitting the dead Sergeant! I slumped pretending I had been hit, hoping they would stop firing. It worked.

Lying there, bent into a ball, breathing as shallowly as possible and with my eyes seeing through the narrowest of slits to my eyelids, I prayed to God and asked His forgiveness for all my grievous sins. I wasn’t afraid to die. I was afraid that I would not go to heaven and be with Sarah but to hell and endure eternity with John Harper. These were the irrational thoughts I had at that moment.

The crunch of footsteps coming closer made my heart pound as I lay there motionless. Not far away, I could hear the maniacal screeching of Tanner, gloating as he plundered the bodies of their valuables and weapons.

The footsteps stopped just behind me and I heard the click of a single-action revolver, its hammer being primed.

The seconds that passed felt like hours as I lay there waiting for the coup de grace.

“Get on with it, Perce!” Johnson’s unmistakable voice yelled, “We ain’t got all day!”

“Yes, Boss,” Percy replied as he came around to face me.

Tanner’s mad enthusiasm for violence called out, “Got a live one here, Boss!”

I heard the wounded trooper, lying helpless on the ground, beg, “Please...I’ve got a wife—”

A shot rang out.

“Widow,” Tanner derided and laughed. “Hey, Perce,” he called, “How’s the little molly boy? Need any help there?”

Percy looked down at me; I could see remorse in his eyes.

A look of shock came over him when I involuntarily blinked. I didn’t move. Percy hesitated then called back, “He’s a goner.”

“Blood oath. Took me four shots!” Tanner complained.

Pitt chimed in, “You need more practice, mate!”

They laughed that same vicious, dissolute laugh that Jeremiah Hickson laughed when I paid him his blood money. Percy laughed as well but it was not the same. I could feel his loathing for Tanner and Pitt.

Percy’s eye caught a glimpse of the chain of Sarah’s silver locket protruding from my shirt collar and he pulled it out and yanked it off me. Rummaging through my pockets, he called out to his mates, “This little bugger’s poorer than a church mouse. He really did need that fiver.”

Standing, he reached over me and rifled through the sergeant’s pockets, collecting sundry items, coin and his pistol.

Johnson called out, “Get a move on!”

He gave me one final, unreadable look then strode toward his cohorts.

The dead horse had been unhitched from the wagon, leaving three to pull the load. The dead driver had been irreverently pushed from his seat and replaced by Johnson. Pitt jumped up and sat next to him until Tanner got in and pushed Pitt into the back; Tanner felt it was his right to sit with the boss. Percy jumped into the tray, knowing he would have been relegated there anyway.

“Change of plans,” I overheard Johnson say, “Tarrawingee. Dixon’s. That little strumpet at the change station took too much interest in where we were going,” and with the crack of a whip and a “Geehar!” and the wagon trundled off.

I don’t know how long I lay there too scared to move, too scared to call out. I had to do something, but what? I couldn’t go to the police, I was part of this butchery and, if they captured Johnson, he would implicate me and I would surely hang.

I had no money to take me anywhere, no food and the angle of the sun told me that it was around midday. The skies were greying over with foreboding clouds to the south and it would be night soon. I was miles away from anywhere. If someone came across this carnage, how would I explain my being here? I had to go but to where?

I gingerly stood up and took in the horrible slaughter around me. The blood of so many honest men soaked the rocky ground. The horses that had escaped injury or death and hadn’t run off, were standing near their fallen riders or gathered in little groups.

“This wasn’t my fault,” I told myself. “If I hadn’t been the dupe, someone else would have been. I didn’t kill these men, they did and they tried to kill me.”

Standing there, amid the horror, I forced myself to realise that no one was going to help me out of this. I was on my own. I could simply lie down and wait to die...or I could act and save myself.

A plan was quickly formulating itself.

Godfrey Saunders was wrong: I did have a choice and I made it.

My horse stood where I’d tethered it.

Unstrapping my two valises from it, I opened one and took out Harper’s old revolver. He had not looked after it and I chided myself for not oiling and testing it after I stole it from him. I put the gun in my belt and hoped, too, that the cartridges in the chamber and those in handkerchief would fire. Thrusting the handkerchief in my pocket, I felt something there: Sarah’s silver locket. Percy...

I shook Percy’s kindness from my thoughts and, donning my mackintosh and hat, I unfastened the reins from the tree branch and urged my old horse to join the others then selected the best of the troopers’ horses still standing. I needed a strong, fast horse and the

sergeant's was the biggest. Securing my valises to it, I assured myself that I was only borrowing his horse. The police would eventually discover the owner of mine by its branding and that would link it to Percy, not to me.

The sergeant had chosen his mount well: he was a strong bay gelding with a good speed to him and very compliant to my urgings.

I had been able to follow the route the wagon had taken but soon it would not be possible to see. It was apparent they were heading toward Wangaratta, the intended destination of the gold! The gloomy night was catching up to me and, even if there had been a full moon, it would have been obscured by the scudding clouds.

My thoughts were flipping from what lay ahead to what would have transpired behind me. It was most likely that the authorities in Wangaratta, awaiting their shipment of gold and bank notes, were becoming concerned that it hadn't arrived. They would be mounting a search party soon and I had to get off the main road. Knowing that Johnson had changed their destination to Tarrawingee meant that, if Hilda had been aware of their 'business' and reported it, she would not have known of their new destination. At least, this is what I was hoping for.

The rain began. Only a drizzly shower at first and then a little heavier. I could still see the road ahead but the tracks were being obliterated quickly by the persistent raindrops. Luck was on my side: I reached a junction in the road and a road sign: "*Wangaratta 14 mi; Tarrawingee 5½ mi*" one way west, "*Beechworth 10 mi*" the other way east and "*Everton 3½ mi*" along a bush track heading south.

I spurred my horse toward Tarrawingee, the town Johnson nominated.

The tiny village was dark and quiet when I reached it. I guessed it was about seven o'clock and the rain kept everyone indoors except for one late night patron leaving the Star Hotel, one of the two public houses in the village. Accosting him mid-stride, he wasn't in any mood to dally and immediately directed me to Dixon's, a homestead a few miles south along the Dry Creek Road, even though he seemed surprised that I should want to go there.

My hunger and exhaustion were overridden by my determination. It was still raining lightly and obstinately and I was soaked to the skin when the simple sign on the gate

proclaiming, “*DIXON – KEEP OUT*” presented itself. The gate was all there was, the softwood post and rail fence it had been attached to was almost nonexistent, destroyed by white ants long ago.

In the distance, through the misty rain, I could just barely make out the homestead on a low rise, with a smoking chimneystack and a feeble light glowing from a window. Dismounting, I led the bay along the fence line making my way along the side toward the back of the hut where the scrub had been left to overgrow and impinge on the back paddock and stables.

Crossing the fence line at a wide gap in it, I cautiously picked my way through the sparse bush and tied the bay where he wouldn't be seen.

Whickering from the stables put me on full alert; I stopped dead in my tracks waiting for any movement or sound from the hut.

Nothing.

Carefully, I pulled Harper's gun from my belt and hesitantly stepped toward the hut. The sounds of boisterous, alcohol-fuelled laughter wafted over to me on the sodden night air. Tanner's strident screeching told me I had the right place.

Inside, Dixon's two-room hut was lit by one kerosene lamp and a blazing fire in the open fireplace over which was suspended a cast-iron cauldron of stewing meat. The table in the middle of the larger room was a crude confection of roughly hewn slabs of tree trunks attached to trestle legs at each end. The chairs were of odd sorts, some factory-made, and which had seen much better days, and the others homemade of whatever material was at hand. Accompanying this coarse furniture were mismatched place settings scattered across the table surface, soiled with the remnants of the stew partaken hurriedly and indelicately. Several large stone jars of home-distilled liquor lay on the table and floor, their contents in partially consumed mugs and cups and splashed on the table.

On the table also, among this chaos of victuals, was a large metal strongbox, its lock smashed apart and discarded and its lid thrown open. Piles of bank notes, gold sovereigns, sundry coins and gold bullion, separated into neat, equal piles, stood along the centre plank of the table like a regiment of soldiers at attention.

Dixon and his son, Junior, sat at one end of the table, the greed in their eyes tangible as they ogled more riches than they would ever see in their lifetime. Dixon was quite elderly, thin and stooped. Hard work should have been the cause of his frailty but it was more likely to be disease and his dipsomaniacal habits. His son, Junior, was far heftier and, by the size of him and the condition of the farm, he was not in love with honest work. But this, the offer of easy money, they did love and had assisted many local duffers and thieves for a small recompense. Johnson had quickly changed to Dixon's once that stupid loose-tongued Pitt had blurted their original destination of Myrtleford to that little trollop at the change station.

Johnson, Tanner and Pitt occupied three of the remaining four rickety chairs while Percy stood by the fireplace, nursing his cup and quietly musing his past and future. They had each netted the equivalent of ten years' wages in one afternoon's work. He could now give this game away and return to Bathurst to his wife and three children and, perhaps, turn his hand to a trade. His accomplices didn't have any plans other than inebriation and fornication.

"You know what I'm going to do tomorrow?" boomed Tanner senselessly, slamming his cup on the table, "I'm going to go back to the Hun's daughter and tup her till her ears fall off!"

"If you can get it up," laughed Pitt, "You're so drunk your prick's gone into hiding!"

This brought on another round of strident laughter and guzzling from those at the table.

Once the cackling had died down, Johnson took control, "Well, boys," he said gulping down the last of the contents of his cup, "a nice haul. Dixon, Junior, "he said handing the old man a few bank notes, "here's your twenty for the use of your place. Tanner, Pitt, Percy, an equal cut each, give or take a farthing. I'll sort out the bullion tomorrow."

With little hesitation and much voracity, Tanner and Pitt scraped their respective hoard toward them and filled their pockets while Percy ambled to the table and collected his.

I heard all of this as I stood paralysed outside the door, gun in my hand and heart in my throat. “*This could all go terribly wrong,*” I thought. With a silent prayer for deliverance by God, one way or the other, my next thought was, “*Now or never.*”

Now!

I flung the door wide open and stood at the entrance of my hell and took in the scenario. The shock of my bursting in took everyone by surprise and they sat there in stupefied transfixion. Immediately, I aimed my gun directly at Johnson, who sat with his back to me barely four feet away and turned his head to see me.

“You forgot my share,” I said trying desperately to not show how terrified I was.

Tanner and Pitt made a shaky effort to get to their feet.

“Don’t...” I warned.

Johnson played along, “Steady, boys,” and indicated them to sit down. Turning slightly in his chair to meet me eye to eye, he grinned, “Careful, son, that ancient thing could be loaded.”

“I just want my money.” No matter how tightly I held onto that gun, and with both hands, it still trembled.

“You’ll get your money. Just put that thing down. No one has to get hurt,” Johnson promised.

“Yeah,” I scoffed, “you left me there. You tried to kill me. Just give me my money and I’ll go.”

Johnson was relaxed and debated, “How many rounds you got? Five? Six? Let’s see, one, two, three...” he counted, “I hope you’re a quick, dead shot, boy, because I reckon you’ll only squeeze off one before—”

“And that one will be yours, you bastard. Give me my money!”

Percy, quietly, interjected, “Fair enough, Boss. He did his part. Give him his fiver.”

“A share,” I said looking straight at Johnson.

“Eh?” Percy queried.

“You heard. I want an equal share.” I was going for broke and I didn’t care. These murderers planned to kill me all along. I was dead in their eyes, anyway.

Tanner and Pitt laughed at the absurdity of my demand. Johnson smiled at me and said, almost in admiration, “You got balls, I’ll say that, boy.”

“Just give me my share, you prick. You tried to kill me.”

This brought on a round of mirth from Pitt who mocked, “Looks like you do need more practice, Tanner.”

Tanner was not impressed and glared at me. The situation was becoming a standoff when Percy, once again, tried to calm everyone down, “Boss, no need for any more bloodshed. We got plenty. Give the boy a hundred.”

Tanner objected vehemently, “What’s to say he won’t snitch to the coppers?”

“I was your decoy, you imbecile. I helped you murder those twenty troopers. I’ll hang as high as you lot if I do.”

“Come on, Boss,” Percy urged then addressed me, “a hundred, all right?”

My options were limited and a hundred was far better than five, “A hundred.”

Johnson took up the negotiations, “A hundred. Out of your share, Percy.”

Percy was momentarily flummoxed then acquiesced, “I’m good with that, Boss,” and peeled off some bank notes from his share and took the few steps that separated us toward me, stretching his arm out to me. I snatched them out of his hand and stuffed them into my pocket.

“I don’t want to see you anywhere near me, you understand, my fancy-boy?” Johnson warned, “I’ll kill you if I do, you understand? Now piss off!”

“Just go, Robert,” Percy solemnly advised.

With that, I took one last look at the astonished, contemptuous faces staring at me with homicidal eyes, and I slowly backed out of the door, slamming it behind me. I turned and ran as fast as I could, the rain hindering my progress but also hiding my tracks. Reaching the dead sergeant’s horse, I jumped on and spurred him into a full gallop.

Johnson was calm, murderously calm, as he devised his next move. All about him were silent and anticipating his next words and when they came, they were spat out with venom, “You fucking moron, Percy! What sort of black tracker are you? Can’t tell a corpse from a catfish?”

“He was playing possum, Boss,” stammered Percy.

“You’ll be playing a corpse if it happens again. Now go and get that money back! Pitt, you go with him. I want that little bastard’s balls!”

Percy was hesitant; he didn’t agree with Johnson but there was too much to lose if he argued. He looked over to Pitt who had a defiant smirk smeared across his face.

“Well?!” boomed Johnson, “What the fuck are you waiting for?!”

Percy snatched up his oilskin and hat and stormed out for the stables. Pitt followed but was stopped by Johnson as he passed, “Black balls, too.”

I rode like the Devil possessed me, occasionally looking back to see if I was being followed. My horse was sure-footed and had a long stride, the rain and scrubby earth giving him very little impediment. We dashed back along the dirt track from Dixon’s to Tarrawingee and, once on the Wangaratta Road, slowed down and, seeing a narrow break in the bush along the road, detoured into it. The rain had stopped but it was cold and very dark. This bush track led us south and into more densely vegetated bush. As the track narrowed, we slowed to a canter, then a trot and finally a walk until it petered out. Ducking low-hanging branches, we pushed through, the canopy of branches obscuring the night sky, until we came across a small clearing. “*Must have been a bushie’s rest camp,*” I thought. It didn’t matter what it was; the horse and I were completely depleted and, deep in the bush, this was as good a place to rest as any.

I dismounted and tied the bay nearby where there was some good growth of grass for him as he must have been as ravenous as I was. Looking around for a place to rest, I found a large old tree with protrusive roots. I settled into it, slouched against it in an upright position, my mackintosh covering me like a tent and the tree roots cradling me. I was shivering with cold and fear, knowing that they would come after me and praying that they would not find me. It was all in God’s hands now. My eyes closed in prayer but, before I was aware of it, my exhaustion overtook me and I slumped deep in slumber.

I don't know how long I slept if, indeed, I had slept at all, but my consciousness was suddenly awoken by the sound of a twig snapping underfoot. Startled and alarmed, I looked up only to have a gloved hand cover my mouth and push my head against the tree trunk.

“Shhh...” was the only sound I heard. I turned my eyes to the sound and to the man crouched beside me. Percy.

“Shhh,” he reiterated, “Pitt's close. Keep quiet.”

I nodded my understanding of his command and he removed his hand from my mouth. My mind was awash with questions, my eyes darting to find where Pitt was. Pitt was not the maniac Tanner was but he was still a murderer and did as he was told.

“Johnson wants the money back,” Percy whispered, “and your balls. Give me the money and I'll say you got away. I don't want to hurt you, Robbie.”

Once again, my mouth was as dry as the sands on Tamarama. I didn't have a chance to utter a word when Pitt emerged from the darkness, gun in hand, and a malevolent grin on his face. “Kissy, kissy, Percy?” he mocked.

Percy stood abruptly and faced Pitt, “No need to harm the boy, Pitt—” he submitted.

“Move off, Perce, I want a clear shot,” Pitt warned.

“Just take the money and let him go.”

“Without the money, he'll snitch. Besides, Perce, you're not the Boss. And I don't take orders from black mongrels. Now move off!” Pitt was still drunk and unsteady on his feet as he waved his gun about menacingly.

“Think about it, Pitt, another death on your—”

A shot rang out, then another and Percy slumped to the ground, dead.

“It don't matter a whit to me,” Pitt said, addressing Percy. He then looked at me as I sat stupefied by the cold-bloodedness and ease with which this man could end a life. He took a staggering step toward me and uttered, “That's one...” and raised his arm to fire at me.

Two shots rang out: one narrowly missing me and lodging in the tree trunk, the other from my gun hitting Pitt in the hip. Pitt looked at me stunned and incredulous, “You bastard. You shot me.”

I jumped to my feet and levelled my gun at Pitt, “Don’t...” I warned, fearfully.

Pitt took shaky aim at me and fired again, wildly missing me. I fired at him again and again and again until the chamber of my gun was emptied. All of my bullets found their target and Pitt crumpled to the ground, gaping wounds oozing with his life’s blood.

I stood petrified by what had happened and by what might have been. I slowly made my way to Pitt, my gun trained on him even though it was empty and of no use. He did not move or make a sound, his eyes staring blankly into space.

A sudden fear overcame me: where were the others? Percy said Pitt was close. Were the others close enough to hear the gunshots? I looked blindly into the darkness of the surrounding bushland, listening for any sound or movement.

Nothing.

I stood there, listening and watching for what seemed to be an eternity. “*They came alone,*” I finally conceded to myself.

Looking down at Pitt once more, I crouched beside him and did to him what he had done to those troopers: I prized his revolver from his hand and rummaged through his pockets, relieving him of his share of the booty, his fob watch, a pen knife and his cartridge pouch. Feeling a stickiness on my hands, I looked at them to see they were covered with Pitt’s blood. The realisation that I had taken a life made me tremble with repulsion and wiped my hands on his jacket...and I retched. While I had orchestrated Harper’s reckoning, this felt different...or, perhaps, it felt the same...I cannot say; I was the instrument that had taken both lives.

Pulling myself together, I looked at Pitt; I did to him what he was about to do to me. I was not sorry, I insisted. He and Harper deserved to die; both had tried to kill me. Both had failed.

I looked to Percy and went to him. Kneeling beside him, I made the sign of the cross and said a silent prayer for God to take his soul and give him eternal, peaceful rest. This man tried to save my life and I was truly indebted to him but there was nothing I could do for him now. Except...

Rummaging through Percy's pockets, I removed his share of the plunder and all his personal items, including a neatly tied bundle of letters postmarked 'Bathurst', bundling the meagre collection into his handkerchief.

Percy's gun was still in his grip when I had an idea. Returning to Pitt, I placed Harper's old weapon in Pitt's hand. It was a ruse that may or may not work but it meant that, at the very least, I was now in possession of a much newer weapon and cartridges. I had gambled that Harper's old abused gun would not misfire or the cartridges explode on ignition.

Rustling from the undergrowth set my heart racing and I took cover by the tree that had cradled me. Pitt's gun was at the ready when Percy's handsome mount, the thoroughbred, trampled his way in toward its slain master. There was no other movement anywhere.

The horse seemed to understand that its master was dead and it stood there, head bowed nuzzling Percy.

I carefully made my way to it, hoping it would remember me and the rubdown and feed I had given it. "Easy, boy," I coaxed, "I won't hurt you. Easy."

Taking hold of the reins, I led it to the sergeant's horse and transferred my valises from it to the thoroughbred.

I took one final look at the scene before me and bowed my head to Percy, "I'm so sorry, Percy," then, wiping the tears from my eyes, mounted his horse and left.

We lumbered along the road, Percy's thoroughbred and I, both dead tired and hungry; I hadn't eaten since sharing Percy's food the night before last and the only fresh water I had had was, thankfully, the rain. To the east, the first glint of day was pushing forth.

I wanted to know more about the man who saved my life not once, but twice, and read the last of the letters his wife had sent him. It was a letter full of love, hope and positive aspirations for a better future for them and their three children. Percy was a good man driven to desperation because of the colour of his skin. "One day," I mused, "this will all change when we are all the of the same skin tone, a mix of red, black, white and yellow." I snorted, "Not in my lifetime."

It was almost dawn and I could make out a large township in the distance: Wangaratta. It boasted a new railway station linking it to Wodonga to the north and my destination, Melbourne, to the south. The fairly large population meant there was a good selection of hotels and a certain amount of anonymity for me.

I skirted the township and came in from the south end, stopping at the first stable I came across on the town's outskirts. The old stable owner met me and agreed to agist Percy's horse for a month paying him with gold sovereigns I had taken. The stable owner was much impressed by the horse and so would not have any trouble selling him and his tack when I didn't return in a month's time. I asked the owner where I could find a good cheap establishment to bathe, eat and rest and he directed me to a small hotel not far from the stables. I also asked him which was the best hotel in the town proper.

The town was still awakening so there weren't many people around and, lugging my two red valises, I found the place, the Prospector's Inn, and registered under the name of Patrick Morrison.

The rest of the day was occupied by taking a hot bath, eating a hot meal and sleeping much of the day and all night.

“Ahem.”

The gentle clearing of my throat alerted the desk clerk of my existence. He immediately looked up at me and graciously offered, “Good morning, Miss, and welcome to the Royal Victoria Hotel. How may I help?”

What he smiled at on the other side of his counter was Rebecca Davies, not Robert, clad in my Sunday best and with a newly purchased bonnet to cover my short hair. I smiled at the clean-shaven young man, who was dressed in a black suit, white shirt with a stiff winged collar and black tie, and replied courteously and demurely, “I would like a room, please. With a bath if at all possible.”

“Of course, Miss. The Royal Victoria can accommodate any request. How long will you be with us?”

I looked about me and took in the richness of this new establishment, which had been recommended to me—rather, to Robert—by the stable owner. “When is the next train to Melbourne?” I asked.

“The day after tomorrow, that is, Friday, Miss. In the afternoon.”

It was a little later than I had hoped but, other than another Cobb coach ride—this time on the inside—I decided to wait for the train. “Then I’ll be with you until Friday, the day after tomorrow, thank you.” The clerk smiled pleasantly at me then appeared hesitant. I understood his dilemma and put him at ease, “How much will that be?”

“Thank you, Miss. That is always the most difficult part of my job. That will be one guinea. Meals can be provided in the dining room at an extra charge.”

That was a little more than I anticipated and something I should have expected knowing that this particular hotel was built with no expense spared and had its own theatre. I withdrew my coin purse from my reticule and counted out the one pound and one shilling upon which the young man turned the register around to me and handed me the pen. I filled in my name, ‘*S Davies, Sydney*’.

“Travelling alone, Miss?”

“Yes.”

“Quite dangerous, if I may say so. Just the other day a gold escort was bailed up on its way from Beechworth. Twenty good men lost their lives.”

The news, coming from this perfect stranger, shocked me. It was as though my secret had been discovered. I must have appeared as distraught as I felt.

“Are you all right, Miss?” the clerk earnestly enquired.

“Yes...yes...I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.” The realisation that my actions had caused so much pain to these men and their families stabbed me deeply and tears welled in my eyes.

“Please don’t fret so, Miss. It won’t be long before those callous murderers are brought to justice. They will hang.”

“Do they know who did it?”

“The Johnson gang. They had the audacity to stay at Schwartzman’s change station in Beechworth. Black trackers traced them to Tarrawingee.”

“They got away?”

“Not all. Two of the gang were found in bushland some miles away. Dead. They shot each other. A feud, police say. Honour among thieves. As if there were such a thing!”

“Indeed,” I agreed numbly.

The clerk handed me a key and rang the bell on the table at which sound a younger man stepped up and took my two red valises.

“Room seventeen,” the clerk instructed the porter then turned to me, “Do enjoy your stay, Miss Davies.”

I hesitated, shook the despair and anguish out of my head and asked, “May I ask a favour of you? Could you arrange my ticket to Melbourne, please? I am quite weary and would dearly like to rest.”

“Certainly, Miss. First class?”

“If you would. And I have a small package to send to my friend in Bathurst.”

“We can take care of that, too.”

I handed the clerk a small, paper-wrapped parcel that contained Percy’s personal effects and his full share, together with a letter I had written to his wife explaining that Percy had met with a terrible accident while saving a friend’s life and these were his savings and possessions – mostly lies but the truth where, it mattered most. I signed it ‘Robert’ with no return address. The letter Percy had asked me to post had been in my jacket pocket, forgotten, after that awful encounter with Gerhard and what followed. I handed that to the clerk as well.

With these transactions finalised, I followed the porter to my room.

They were on the same road I had taken and were overlooking the same vista I had the day before: the township of Wangaratta.

“Reckon the little molly is there, Boss?” Tanner asked.

Johnson didn’t reply but his steely, piercing gaze confirmed that he did.

CHAPTER 11

May, 1874 – Thursday

Wangaratta, Victoria

My room in the Royal Victoria had luxury appointments and having my own private bathroom was another indulgence I gratefully appreciated but my night was sleepless. Now that my fatigue and hunger had been sated, the course of awful events and atrocious acts leading me here played over and over again in my mind. The images of Percy being killed, the disbelief on Pitt's face when I shot him, the needless slaughter of so many good men, the molten hatred of that German tyrant for me, my detestable treatment of Hilda, Harper's limp body gently swinging by the rope around his neck...and Sarah. If only I had not loved Sarah. My overwhelming desire for this beautiful young woman caused all these people to suffer so.

The morning sun slowly lit up my room and, as its intensity grew, so did my resolve to not be the cause of any more harm to anyone. My kind of love was poisonous and, if this meant I could not love as my heart desired, I would not love at all.

Johnson and Turner had camped in the scrub just outside of Wangaratta Wednesday night, convinced their prey, Robert Davies, had come this far and was heading for Melbourne by the fastest means possible: train. Their plan, cooked up that night along with a rabbit they had shot, was to find the little bastard and, not only to relieve him of the cash he had stolen from Pitt and Percy, but also his life. Johnson decided to start searching all of the hotels,

boarding houses, doss houses and bordellos in the area at first light; if he was here, they were determined to find him.

The township of Wangaratta was slowly shaking off its sleepiness as the two unkempt riders walked through the town's outskirts and surveyed each of the buildings sparsely scattered along the road. As the buildings became more concentrated, Johnson and Turner stopped at each that offered accommodation or travellers' respite, enquiring the whereabouts of their 'missing little brother, Robert'.

Each of the first dozen or so establishments had turned up nothing but Johnson was resolute and adamant that the little snake was here, somewhere.

I spent the day in my room, calling for the chamber maid and porter to bring me each of the local papers as they were published, and my meals, handsomely rewarding them for their service. I scoured the local newspapers for any news of the robbery and the efforts of the police but, other than the information the desk clerk had provided, there was nothing more.

The day wore on slowly.

It was coming onto dusk and Johnson had spoken to almost every owner of each of the places a youth on the run could hide out when, on the southern edge of town, they came upon a stable with a paddock holding several horses.

Turner pulled up his horse and commented to Johnson, "Ain't that Percy's nag over there? The bay?"

Johnson peered at the magnificent animal and, without acknowledging Turner's comment, turned his mount toward the stable and the man near the entrance. "You there!" Johnson called, "the bay thoroughbred in the paddock, who owns it?"

The stable owner looked at Johnson suspiciously, "Why do you ask?"

"Er, my little brother has one just like it and he's run away from home and his ma and pa are worried. He's a little slow-witted."

This didn't quite wash with the stable owner, "Slow-witted, you say? The fellow who's agisted that bay certainly isn't an imbecile."

"Yeah, yeah. You know what families are like. They expect more than they get."

“Yeah, I can see their disappointment.”

Johnson was becoming impatient with this old bugger but persisted as politely as his anger would permit, “I’ll describe him to you, all right, mister? Just tell me if you seen this bloke, all right? He’s about five and a half feet tall, skinny, blond hair and peach-fuzz face.”

“Yeah,” added Turner, “and a bit of a milksop.”

The stable owner stroked his chin, “Family, you say?”

Turner jumped in, “Yeah, our ma and pa are real worried.”

“You two are brothers?” queried the stable owner.

Turner’s comment caught Johnson off guard and he lost his patience with the stable owner, “Look, you old codger, that’s his horse over there. Just tell us where the little bugger is and there won’t be no trouble.” Johnson pulled back his oilskin coat and put his hand on the pistol on his belt, “Do you understand what I’m getting at?”

The stable owner gave Johnson a wry smile, “No need for that, son. The young fellow who left the horse asked for cheap lodgings and I told him the nearest one was the Prospectors Inn up the road and two streets to the left. He took his two valises and left.”

“When was this?”

“Yesterday morning.”

Johnson gave Turner a shifty look, then returned his steely gaze to the stable owner. Without a word, they turned their horses and followed the directions the old man had given them.

By the time they reached the Prospectors Inn, night was quickly enveloping the town. Johnson, sure that they had cornered their quarry, told Turner to wait outside with the horses and to keep their carpetbags safe—and to shoot the little bugger should he try to escape.

Johnson trudged in and scanned the reception room and its few occupants for Robert Davies. Failing to see him, Johnson approached the desk and demanded of the man there, “You got a Robert Davies here. What room?”

“What?” the man asked, perplexed by Johnson’s rudeness.

Johnson snatched the register and spun it toward him.

“Hey!” the man objected, as Johnson ran his finger down the names.

Thwarted, Johnson lent over the desk and grabbed the man by his waistcoat, “A boy, five and a half feet tall, blond, carrying two valises came here yesterday morning. Where is he?”

The man was visibly shaken by this unwarranted act of violence and replied shakily, “A boy...yes...a boy like you described did come in yesterday...but his name was...was—”

“Did he have two red valises?”

“Yes.”

“Where is he?”

“G...gone...He must have left before dawn...No one saw—”

Johnson jerked the man closer, “If you’re telling me bullshit...”

“No...no...He’s gone. His room’s empty. I swear...”

Johnson pushed the man back and stopped to think. After a moment’s deliberation, he turned back to the man, who shrank back fearfully, and demanded, “I want a room for the night—his room. And you’d better not call the coppers.”

“No...no, Sir...”

I was sorry to have to leave the Royal Victoria Hotel; the staff had been particularly hospitable, the premises maintained to an excellent standard and the food tasty and plentiful—all the qualities Mr Morrison strived for and attained in his hotel in Paddington. How I missed Mr Morrison, Corporal Roberts and, in particular, Patrick.

“Enough sentiment!” I silently chided, “You made your choices.” I heaved a deep regretful sigh and took one final look around my room, making sure I had left nothing behind. It was only seven a.m. and my valises had been collected by the porter and stacked with others on the trolley ready to be wheeled to the railway station.

One final check of my reflection in the mirror saw a forlorn, grown-up Rebecca Davies: long, dark blue skirt, matching bodice, white undershirt tied at the neck, three-quarter length olive green coat and my newly purchased bonnet tied in place. Robert was securely packed away in one of my valises. Pitt’s revolver was safely nestled in the new

canvas satchel I had the chamber maid purchase for me the day before. Everything was in readiness for my six and a quarter hour train journey to the Melbourne Terminus in Flinders Street and my new life.

There was quite a lot of excited activity in the reception area of the hotel as many of the guests were, like me, catching the train, due to arrive from Wodonga at seven forty-five and leave for Melbourne at seven-fifty promptly. I watched as the porter wheeled the trolley, laden with trunks and valises of many types, out of the front door. My two were in amongst that jumble and each of them tagged with the Royal Victoria's label indicating their station destination; mine were "*RD, Melbourne Terminus*".

I had already settled my account but, as an afterthought, I decided to ask the desk clerk the name of a hotel in Melbourne he recommended. My turn came and the young man who tended me upon my arrival, greeted me warmly, "Miss Davies. Good morning. I trust your stay with us was to your satisfaction."

"Very much so, thank you and please convey my thanks to the chamber maid and porter. I know you are extremely busy, Sir, but could you recommend a quality hotel in Melbourne?"

"Certainly, Miss," he said with a genuine smile as he reached under the counter and retrieved a calling card. Handing it to me he said, "The Menzies Hotel in Bourke Street is highly recommended. If you prefer, I can send a reservation on your behalf by electric telegraph."

"Thank you. That would be ideal. One week, please."

"My pleasure, Miss," he said as he handed me the card, adding, "I'm sorry to see you go...if I may be so bold to say."

I smiled at him and gave him an apologetic nod. This just added to my remorse; he was a nice young man and, had circumstances—and I—been different...

Johnson and Turner strode toward the Prospectors Inn stables, carrying their heavy carpetbags and sleeping rolls, no less unkempt or soiled than they were the day before. Fixing their belongings to their saddled horses, Johnson turned to Turner, "If that

jackanapes was here yesterday and Percy's horse is here, then he would have wanted to get to Melbourne the fastest way."

"Coach?" Turner queried.

"Rail."

"But that costs money."

Johnson looked at Turner incredulously, "He's got money, you idiot, our money!"

The penny dropped, "Yeah, right, Boss, lots of money."

"Let's go have a chat with the station master," Johnson said, mounting his horse.

At precisely half past seven, those of us leaving by train were ushered onto an omnibus, provided by the hotel, for the short journey to the newly built Wangaratta train station, our luggage having preceded us there to be loaded onto the train by the porters.

There, we were invited to proceed to the waiting room and for the ladies to avail themselves of the seating provided therein.

I followed the group of fellow travellers toward the waiting room and, at the edge of my bonnet, my eye caught a glimpse that horrified me: Johnson and Turner, holding the reins of their horses, accosting the station master. My heart skipped several beats and I stopped mid-step.

"Are you all right, Miss?" a male's voice from behind me asked, jolting me out of my stupor.

"Yes...yes. I beg your pardon," I apologised when I realised I was holding up traffic. I joined the rest of my party in the waiting room and sat in controlled panic, watching Johnson through the window, standing over the station master who, in turn, shook his head and turned his back on the two inquisitors.

It was then that Johnson looked my way; I became breathless and quietly opened my canvas satchel slipping my hand inside to clutch Pitt's revolver. I prayed to God that this would not lead to further bloodshed or loss of life.

Johnson gave his horse's reins to Turner then strode purposefully toward me in the waiting room. My grip on the revolver tightened. I bent my neck so that the bonnet obscured my face. The man who was concerned about my well-being had sat beside me and

was keeping a watchful eye on me. He noticed my apprehension over the approach of this dirty, unshaven ruffian and offered his reassurance. “Miss, do not concern yourself. No need to fear. If you will permit me,” he said gently as he took hold of my free hand. I looked up at him and saw the kindly face of an elderly gentleman with a benevolent smile.

Johnson stepped into the waiting room to the unwelcoming stares and glares of those waiting with me. I held my breath, clutching onto the elderly gentleman’s hand as Johnson looked over each of us. He took a step in my direction; my gentleman friend whispered words of support and I relaxed and rested my head on his shoulder.

Johnson gave one final look around the room and left with a condescending snort and a scowl on his face and rejoined Tanner just as the train from Wodonga pulled into the station.

One by one the awaiting passengers stood and prepared to embark the train, commenting to each other about the vile character of that interloper. I turned to my protector, my mouth so dry with fear that I had difficulty saying my words, “I can’t thank you enough, Sir. That man—”

“No need to explain, dear girl. Travel these days is very dangerous for anyone, let alone a young woman such as yourself. You may not have heard about the recent murders of the troopers from Beechworth. Senseless waste of human life.”

All I could do was nod feebly in agreement. If he only knew...

I joined the rest of the passengers boarding the first-class carriage of the train and found my allocated seat next to the window. Down along the platform, I could see our luggage trolley being unloaded into the baggage compartment. My valises were near the bottom of the stack.

Johnson and Turner had now remounted their horses and were watching the goings-on with intense scrutiny when Turner observed from a distance and pointing to the trolley, “Ain’t them the red bags what belong to our molly boy?”

Johnson snapped his attention to the trolley and spurred his horse toward it, pulling up a hair’s breadth from one of the porters. He jumped from his mount and found the label attached to one of the handles and tore it off.

“He’s on board!” he yelled to Turner who prodded his horse along. Johnson threw his reins to Turner then jumped aboard the train.

I panicked. I looked about me not knowing what I could do. If I stayed, Johnson would surely find me. If I left the train, Turner would wonder why and most likely pursue me. Either way, someone would get hurt—all three of us were armed.

Behind me, the ticket collector entered our carriage to check and punch our tickets, “Tickets, please,” he asked of each passenger.

Johnson had progressed through the second-class carriage and was now at the door of my carriage.

“Ticket, please, Miss,” the collector requested. I fumbled in my pocket and retrieved my train ticket. “Thank you, Miss,” he said as he checked it and punched it.

Johnson was now inside my carriage and less than six feet away from me, looking at every person with such maniacal intensity I had never seen before.

“Ticket, please, Sir,” the ticket collector demanded of Johnson.

“Get out of my way,” Johnson demanded as he attempted to push his way through.

The beefy ticket collector stood his ground, “If you don’t have a ticket, get off the train. Sir.”

Johnson stood up to the ticket collector, almost nose to nose. As the situation became more tense, several gentlemen, including my saviour, stood in their seats in tacit support of the railway employee. Johnson could see he was outnumbered even though he did have a weapon. He quickly looked at the remaining passengers and decided Robert Davies was not present. With a disdainful look, he turned on his heels, pushing one gentleman aside and sneered, “Fuck youse all,” much to the gasps of shock and horror of the ladies present.

I finally took a breath and sat in my seat trembling. The rest of the passengers spoke to each other, appalled by the actions and language of this cowardly delinquent blackguard lowlife who dared to interfere with them.

Peering around my bonnet and through my window I watched Johnson get off the train and be met by Turner. He mounted his horse and said something to Turner, something I couldn’t hear over the noise of the engine and the clamour within the carriage.

“All aboard!” and we were on our way followed by the evil stares of Johnson and Turner.

It was going to be a long journey to my destination. Along the way, some passengers alighted while others embarked at the sixteen stops to Melbourne. I was not in a convivial mood and found myself staring out of the window, enveloped by my own thoughts and internal conversations. I wondered what was in store for me there.
