

Crocodile Child

Crocodile Dreaming, Prequel 1

by Graham Wilson,

Published: 2018

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Author's Note

This is a novel set in Australia's outback, a place where I lived and worked for four decades; including in small towns, aboriginal communities, cattle stations and among remote, rugged and beautiful natural places for which it is famous, places with names like Uluru and Kakadu. These provide the background to this story.

This novel is a work of fiction. The characters are not real people. However, elements of stories have a real basis, as experienced by myself, or as stories of the bush, told around campfires or over bars, somewhere in the Australian Outback. While the general locations described around the Northern Territory and other parts of Australia exist, many finer details are not accurate; they are created as a canvass on which to paint the story.

Backpackers are part of outback Australia. Occasional horror stories occur and get wide coverage. Some, like the Joanna Lees story, or the awful deeds of Ivan Milat contributed ideas to this novel. However these are rare events, as likely to happen in cities or other countries. They do not typify most people's experiences of these places.

The setting of this novel is an external frame for the story. It tells of a journey of a person through places and within himself. In bad situations he does awful things. This reflects human experience. We all have the ability to make terrible choices and do great evil if we cease to value life, but even the worst of people may have parts that are good and decent. So as to the man at the centre of this story and whether he is evil or just a victim of bad circumstances, that is a judgement that only you can make. The question I ask myself is whether, in the same set of circumstances I would have behaved differently. Each us can only answer that honestly for our own self.

Alongside this personal story this book seeks to capture the essence of a place called the Northern Territory of Australia, the centre and north of the Australian continent. This land remains alive in my imagination from when I lived and worked in it. Despite the coming of modern civilisation; with roads, air transport, communication and comfort; the intrinsic character of this place, the 'Territory', remains little altered. It is what Ernestine Hill called, in her famous book of that name, 'a land too vast for human imagination.' Wildlife remains abundant. Stations still muster cattle and buffalo for a living. Aboriginal people live off the land, as they have done for millennia past. Stockmen tell tales around campfires, gazing in awe at immense star filled skies. This is a place where life moves slowly, as befits a land where time is driven by nature. Brilliant desert colours, huge tropical storms and endless emptiness live on.

My thanks to innumerable real characters of the Northern Territory who contributed to this story, by lighting creative fires in my imagination through sharing their own stories and memories.

Prologue

Breaker Mb is a name some call me. They say that I am somehow like him, the renowned Harry Morant, the real Breaker M, come back to life more than 100 years on. It may be, in part, because I can ride a bit like he could – I have ridden my share of mad bad black horses and refused to let them beat me, but it is also because there is a part of me sitting behind my left shoulder that is wild, dangerous, a spirit untamed that will not follow other's rules.

So who am I?

My real name is not something I say; I do not want to share my father's name. He used his first and last names to name me, assuming I would be proud to be like him. But he was a bully and a bastard. The less he is known or remembered the better. So instead I have kept my middle name, Marco, aka Mark and the family initial B. Those who need a better name to use mostly call me Mark B, sometimes, Mark Brown or other B surnames.

These names are like skins. I put them on and shed them again as need arises. I find myself secretly pleased when someone called me Breaker MB; I like the idea of walking in his footsteps, even though it did not end well for him and probably won't for me.

I think this will be a posthumous story like his was.

Whatever happens I will stand straight and laugh at fate!

And yet the Breaker part of me is only part of my story. I have a totemic animal I carry wherever I go, 'Baru', my crocodile ancestor, creature from a distant dreamtime when the first animals came to our land at the far end of the earth. Baru is the world's largest reptile, the saltwater crocodile of Northern Australia and South Asia. Baru is a formidable predator.

In part I am Baru too. In taking his totem and skin, I inhabited his being and he inhabited me. Now I too am a predator like him. So these two parts of my being are there, sitting side by side, each wants to own me. I do not know which will win in the end. Perhaps it will see the ascendancy of my better human spirit, the Breaker returned, perhaps the crocodile will fully own me and will win in the end.

Chapter 1

The Ending.

No, not my ending. That happened long ago when I sold my soul to the devil, Faust like.

That story comes later though it happened earlier.

This time it is my action in causing the ending of another, a sick puppy. He deserved it for vile things he did two little girls, the uncle who raped his nieces while yet children. One of them then killed herself for the shame of what he did to her. For me from then his right to life was forfeit.

I took it on myself to deliver justice, a life for a life. I have no remorse for what I did. I know he died screaming, in great pain and full of terror. I am glad.

This morning I drove back to where I left him yesterday afternoon. It was not to offer relief, but to check his fate was certain. If he still lived I would have used a knife to finish it, to cut away the offending part he had used to brutalise these girls; to let the flow of blood and the desert sun finish what I started. I have gelded horses with a knife before, this time I would have cut away even more. And then I

would have watched with satisfaction until his screams died and his breath died too as his life flowed out of him.

But there was no need. What I returned to was just a swelling, stinking shell, like a day dead pig, skin turning blue and black as gasses filled him and sun dried the bare parts.

He died hard. I can see where he thrashed about, leaving marks of his convulsions in the soft sand. Yesterday I offered him what he thought was a choice that gave a slim hope of escape and survival. But the choice was a false choice. If he had real courage he would have taken the two tablets I left him. I told him they were cyanide and it was true. If he had swallowed them he would have died fast, his life over in seconds or small minutes.

Instead he took the other choice I left, a litre bottle of the best malt whiskey money could buy, as befits a man of Scotland, his home country, not that he deserves that epithet, at least not the man part as he was a coward. I told him it was good whiskey and, as the seal was unbroken, I am sure he believed this to be true.

What he did not know was that, using a fine needle, I had taken out a small amount of the malt liquid and in its place put a small amount of a medicine used by old dog trappers to get the trap shy dingoes. The trappers would take a tasty chunk of meat. Into its middle would go this clear liquid with no smell, though a bitter taste. Once the dog ate it this drug would soon enter its bloodstream, causing violent fits, muscles spasms of its whole body until it could breathe no more and suffocated.

I have been reliably told it works the same in people. Those who have tried agree this death is terrifying and excruciatingly painful as the seizures take hold. Many have said this poison is the most painful way to die.

Death takes an hour or two, depending on how much is consumed. If this man finished the full bottle it would have been a short, but exquisitely painful, half hour. I found a third of a bottle gone so it is likely he rolled around and screamed for a couple hours; that time seems about right.

While it was happening I ate well, drank well and slept well, sure my mission was accomplished, I did not think he had the courage to refuse both choices and die of thirst, perhaps even to try and walk out of the desert across two hundred miles of sand without shade or water. As I drove away, yesterday, my cabin thermometer read 46 degrees Centigrade, and there were four hours until the sun sank behind the dunes to give some relief.

He had dug a half cave into the side of the dune and used it to hide from the sun. And there he had opened the bottle and begun to sip. He had asked me, begged really, for a water bottle before I drove away. I had smiled back, shaken my head and offered him the whiskey instead. He had taken it almost gratefully, trying to hide the terror lurking in his eyes. It seemed he felt this bottle gave him a thread of hope, a way to keep God and judgment at bay. But of course, as he sat waiting for the heat to ease, he took a mouthful and then a couple more. From then what followed was inevitable.

Today, when I found him, I stripped away his clothes and lay him face up to let the jackals and desert vultures eat the soft parts more easily. And I tipped the remainder of that whiskey bottle into the sand, lest it poison some other

unsuspecting creature. I thought of throwing some sand over him to speed his disappearance, but decided to let other creatures feast on him first. Soon enough wind and shifting sand will cover him or, at least, those hard white parts that remain behind when jackals and vultures are done.

As I stood there looking at him for a last time I saw three vultures circling high in the sky and knew their work would begin soon and would bring a fitting end. I drove away feeling glad with what he had felt, pain and terror in equal measure.

At the first proper town I came to I left his clothes in a pile in the souk. I hope someone will put them to better use than he would have. Then I drove back to the airport, returned my unmarked car to the rental company and caught a plane to Hong Kong.

Here for a week I have enjoyed the sounds, sights and tastes of the Orient. I thought that, along the way, I would take pleasure in the company of a local girl, one with a friendly face, warm body and a big smile. But instead I find in me a desire for solitude except for walks in the late night.

I think, in my heart of hearts, I know that my life is coming to the end of a circle, a closing and returning to the beginning. It is as if I have used up my full measure, finished the allotted ration of good and bad. Many would say that final thing I did was bad, but in my mind it is good, a vengeance deserved and given, life for life, pain for pain.

But, like the Breaker of old that some compare me to, I see the end is closing in on me too. The Breaker made it to 37; I am now 34. I think he will outlive me. Before the circle fully closes I need to write down my own story. In my mind I have called it, 'The Breaker', that name some have given me.

But then again perhaps Crocodile's Child is a better name, this creature with whom I have share a totem and spirit since my teenage years. It is more likely that my ending will be a return to the crocodiles than another way.

So I have sat in my hotel room for a week and written it out as best I remember it, using a close ruled notebook and a blue pen. The book is now almost full and the first part of the story is done. Now that I am in the writing flow a little work will finish the rest.

Tomorrow I fly on to Cairns and from there I will return to my home in the empty lands out west, in the places they call outback Queensland and the Northern Territory. I am looking forward to seeing my handful of friends again in these big spaces where very few go. And I am looking forward to gazing out upon wide and empty horizons; they give a solace to an empty soul.

I wish that one of those gone before was there to share it with me, but I have a way of breaking the things I treasure. So I have learned to be content in the company of myself and a few friends.

As to this strange thing called love, I know it is not likely to happen again. But if it does I must be much, much more careful this next time.

Chapter 2

Arrival.

For a minute as we queued to come through customs in Cairns this morning I thought my heart would stop beating. There my Belle was, standing in front of me, the cascade of glossy dark hair, the mid-sized rounded form, curves of hips and body, the slightly mannish squaring of shoulders and, most of all, a flick of the head and wrist as the stray hair is pushed back out of eye line.

My breath was arrested, my heart pounded, I knew it could not be her, the girl who I had most loved but ended with a bullet between her trusting eyes. In that instant of remembering I thought the pain would stop my heart too, the taking of that impossible choice to kill what you most love. But in that instant I knew too it could not be true. What is dead cannot return, gone is gone and ghosts can only live and love in our dreams. But, even though I knew it could not be her, there was a thing in this person, a fusion of life force with the other which was utterly arresting; a sameness and yet a difference too.

She half turned to face my way, opening a bag for a customs inspector, a dozen faces between hers and mine. Now I could see difference as well as sameness. But then she made that same hand to hair movement, and as she did an overwhelmingly familiar expression washed across her face, upturned nose, half tasting the air, half smelling, as if the thing experienced was both exciting and slightly distasteful.

In that instance it was her again, my Belle, savouring a pannikin of rum offered. Then it passed, it was only the other. I breathed again and resumed my slow procession through the queue.

By the time I reached the outside this apparition had vanished, unsighted in the human crowd of the concourse, the melee of taxis, backpacker buses and tourist coaches. I wondered if I will see her again or is she just a fragmentary vision sent to torment.

I catch my own taxi to the town and make a reservation in an upmarket hotel, a place with a view out across the beach to the immense ocean. After a few minutes I am seized by restlessness. I come down to the beachside path and walk away from town, a half hour up to the north until the path ends in a headland of trees. So I return, walking at a measured pace back towards my hotel.

It now looms, rising up before me. I am lost in musing thoughts; I think I will walk a little further yet, though with no specific purpose. I glance out towards the beach.

There is a girl at the edge of the waves, dark haired and distant. She flicks her head and pushes away her hair. It is her, I know it is.

Chapter 3

Mists of Distant Memory.

It is getting hard to remember my early childhood. It often feels that I am looking at it through a shifting and swirling mist, tendrils of which often obscure and confuse my vision.

I think that, as an only child, I spent a lot of time with my mother and that she was beautiful. I think too she smothered me with hugs and affection, proudly showing me off to all who would look. I do remember her dark hair and a beautiful face with red lips and a ready smile. But these are floating memories that shift and drift in and out of my recall. By the time I clearly remember my mother she was much changed. She seemed perpetually haggard and timid, had hair which straggled, often with bruises on her arms and body, sometimes on her face. And she had the mousiest manner, always glancing at the door and through the window out to the street, living in fear of my father returning.

I realise now that she was just another battered woman, in thrall to a bully and endlessly terrified as to what he would do to her next. He had only to look at her and she seemed to cower, if he raised his voice she flinched as if hit. Sometimes he would fling the food she prepared at her and she would stand there unmoving as food dripped and dribbled off her before setting to and seeking to unobtrusively clean it up.

Sometimes, if she was sure he would not return unexpectedly, traces of my mother of old would re-emerge and she would play, talk and laugh with me. But there was always with a nervous tic just below the surface, as if at any time he would arrive and take to her with his fists or worse.

A couple times when I was about seven or eight I tried to stand up to him, with some notion of chivalrous protection of my mother. Once he took to me with a horse whip, laying into me while I cowered in the corner, trying to protect my head with my arms which left my back exposed. It was beaten over and over until it was almost covered with bruises. Another time he used a cricket bat and afterwards it felt like my ribs were broken, they were so sore from the blows he struck.

So, by the time I was old enough to go to school, I tried to keep away from our house as much as possible. My father divided his time between the hotel and our house, as best I can remember. The times of safety and relief were when he was blind drunk and fell down on the lounge, snoring loudly, or crawled off to bed in a stupor. At these times a measure of safety and normality returned to our house and my mother would fix a small meal for just the two of us.

As to what else my father did to fill in his days I am unsure. I know he bet on the horses and dogs and sometimes would turn up with a big wad of cash, though it seemed little came to us for food and other necessities. Perhaps he worked, but if so I have no memory of it or how he supported us. I know there was mostly food on the table which my mother prepared, though often he was ill pleased with it and flung it away before storming off to the hotel. And more and more often, as the years passed before she left, he would hit her as she passed him by. Mostly it was an open handed slap, but increasingly he hit her with his fist though he mostly avoided her face.

Then one day she was not there when I came home from school. It seemed that this absence truly incensed him. Even though he barely noticed her presence he was furious with her absence, asking around the street for her whereabouts and

then, when that achieved nothing, escalating to ranting threats of serious harm to anyone who dared shelter her.

I know not where she went but one day she was back just after I returned from school, dragged through the door by her hair. I was sent to my room. From there I heard it all, his voice screaming accusations and her timid replies, interspersed with hits and grunts of pain. It seemed to go on for ever. After a while there was only whimpering from her and hitting sounds from him as his rage vented. Then came a slamming of the door and silence. I glanced out my window just in time to see my father heading to the hotel. I crept downstairs. My mother was lying on the floor, crying softly, her face and body a mass of cuts and bruises.

Fearful for my mother I called a neighbour who, after a quick check, called an ambulance which took her to hospital. She stayed there for a few days while my father stomped around the house, saying he was going to collect her and bring her home and teach her a lesson she would never forget for running away.

Then one day he spoke of her no more and it seemed she had just disappeared from our lives. Only later did I find out from another boy at school, whose mother worked at the hospital, that she had swallowed a big pile of sleeping tablets and died at that place.

If there was a funeral I never knew of it. After that, in our house there was just my bullying father and me. He did not cook so any food was what I found in the cupboard and it was meagre, sometime a packet of biscuits, sometimes a few tins of something. The good thing was that he was around even less than before; mostly it seemed he was at the pub, staggering home to fall into bed around midnight. Kind neighbours would take it on themselves to give me occasional meals and at times they would leave food items in the post box where I would find them.

But mostly I fended for myself, climbing over fences and sneaking into other houses to pilfer when the owners were out, at times taking food and at other times taking loose change to use to buy food. I tried not to take large amounts lest it be obvious and the police be called, whereas I found a spare dollar or two was rarely noticed. And I had good success with collecting a bottle of milk or a loaf of bread from the early morning shop deliveries before the owner arrived, or with collecting discarded food at the back of the supermarket. When really hungry I would try my hand at walking in to a shop and taking a couple items, things like a bag of lollies or a tin of baked beans that I could slip into the pocket of coat and were unlikely to be noticed. As such times I mostly used a small amount of my loose change to buy some item as this distracted attention from the unpaid things in my pockets.

I tried to keep going to school but it was hard with no money for books and no clean clothes, even though it was a respite from home. But I learned to read and, over time, found my places where I could sit quietly undisturbed and lose myself in the story of someone else's life. I particularly liked war stories, where someone was a hero. I would imagine myself as this, one day returning with enough strength and fighting ability to whip my father with my bare hands. But of course I was a scrawny ten year old and he was a towering man with far greater strength and a viciousness to which I had no counter.

But slowly a hatred of him grew and festered and, even if I could not beat him, I became determined to rid myself of him somehow, perhaps through doing

something to him when he was passed out, drunk. I fed these thoughts but never brought myself to act on them. Instead, whenever he was around I did my best to hide away.

As time went by my thieving got more ambitious, it now included clothes and other minor items I could turn into cash, trinkets of jewellery, small electrical items and other oddments. I kept them small and easy to market and avoided things of high value, knowing this would bring police.

Over time I got cocky, thinking I was too clever to be caught, success breeding confidence and confidence breeding contempt that people were too stupid to know what I was doing. But, like all good things, it came to an end. One day, just as I was slipping a block of chocolate into my pocket, alongside two bags of lollies, an off duty policeman stepped into view, coming around the end of the aisle at the split second the chocolate went into my coat. He saw exactly what I had done. He grabbed me by the scruff, brought me to the shopkeeper and emptied my pockets for all to see. There was only a few dollars' worth but he brought me around to the police station and charged me with shoplifting. He sent another officer around to my house to get my parents. Of course there was no-one home and the house was a kip. But that officer found a neighbour who collected me and brought me home

In due course my father found out. It was when the police summons came for me to appear in court. He gave me the mother of all thrashings, so for a week I was so sore I could barely walk. The court sent a social services officer to investigate before it made it's decision. She took one look and saw the situation. So she recommended that I, Vincent Mark Bassingham, known at school as MB, be made a ward of the state. My father never came to court to contest the charges. So, in addition to being convicted of theft as a minor, I was made a ward of the Victorian government and sent off to the Sunnyside Home for Delinquent Boys at the age of twelve.

I suppose every cloud has its silver lining, at least they made me go to school and for a year my learning resumed.

But, on the other side of the ledger, they were thoroughly evil bastards, as I soon found out.

Chapter 4

Captured.

After the freedom to come and go as a child, despite my father's violent ways, life in the remand home was an utter shock. My life moved from a large amount of freedom to go off as I liked into a life of total regimentation, set meal times, set rising and bed times, set homework and managed leisure, if it could be called this, when we became the playthings of our warders. It was coupled by beatings which even surpassed those of my father when anyone got out of line. There were six men to look after about thirty of us boys and all were sexual deviants. They worked on pairs and each pair had favoured boys that they took to their rooms

and who emerged later, crying. Sometimes screams would be heard but more it was boys who cried themselves to sleep in the night, at times with blood on their sheets and underpants, where they had been ravaged.

We all knew what was being done but none of us could stop it. The couple brave souls who tried to complain were subjected to even worse. One was locked in a cupboard for a week, beaten and sodomised each time he was taken out, and returned with a few crumbs of food and a bottle of water when the sadists had finished.

Often, at night time, after the obligatory hour of homework when they sat us as in a room to do our school tasks, while patrolling and hitting anyone less diligent with a ruler across the knuckles, they would make us all stand facing the wall for hours, telling us not to move a muscle while one warder watched from the side and the other walked behind, looking for any twitch of movement. Should this happen, they hit the victim across the back or legs with a long whippy cane, which whistled as it flew. Sometimes they would burn us with a cigarette to try and make us jump, just little jabs on an unsuspecting bare arm or leg that soon blistered into a raw sore.

The one respite was going to school; they could not reach us there, though after the first ones who tried to speak out, none dared to tell of what was being done. However I discovered that the library was a safe place and I would try and get in there as early as I could in the morning and stay until closing, finding a hidden corner in which to read.

It was there I discovered a book which has stayed with me forever, called *The Breaker* by Kit Denton. I read it in snippets, whenever I could find a moment alone, his willingness to not let anyone push him around and to cheat to get what he needed were music to me, his ability of ride any horse and win fights with his fists also seemed admirable. And I loved the ending where his final words were, 'Shoot straight you bastards!'

So I dipped in and out of this book, often reading the same passages over and over. As I read of his exploits an idea formed in my mind to live a life like he had, off on my own, far away, somewhere in the middle of Australia, even like him to go and fight in a war in a place like Africa and win fame and glory in posterity so that, 100 years on, his name remained known across the land in stories and legend. It was a dream worth dreaming for nobody's child who came from nowhere.

Chapter 5

The Bastard Jailer.

Almost a year had passed while I have lived at the remand home. It was just a jail by another name, once we returned home from school and they closed and locked the doors. Then they were the jailers and we were their captive slaves; slaves to be beaten, slaves to be raped, slaves to do whatever menial and

disgusting tasks they dreamed up. These adult men in their prime were mostly bored and in their boredom they tormented and abused us to get their thrills.

However, like all things, one learns to accommodate. Somehow I mostly kept out of harm's way by keeping a low profile. I had passed the birthday that made me thirteen. I was not nearly as pretty as some of the other boys and had yet to be fancied that way. But it was obvious I was living on borrowed time; sooner or later everyone's turn to be the boy of the moment came around. The warders mostly worked in shifts of two though at times, when one could not make it, there would be only one on duty. Not that it made any difference; even one big man with a big stick was more than a match for terrified early teenage boys with no idea of fighting back. However I had mapped out their routines in my mind and become adept at avoiding most contact, though I was aware that one extra big burly warden, Gus, was starting to look at me with a lustful eye.

Our normal routine was that we helped ourselves to breakfast between seven and seven thirty in the morning and then collected our bags and headed off for school. The checking us out to school had got lax, they only concentrated on checking up back in to make sure they had all their captives returned, some of us had sport after school but the clear rule was that all must be returned by five in the afternoon at which time the doors were locked and bolted. As the windows were barred that was really the end of any outside life until seven next morning.

I had managed to borrow Kit Denton's Breaker book from the school library and was greedily reading it every chance I got, morning noon and night. So, after breakfast, I found a quiet corner where I sat unsighted and read until it was time to leave for school. The story had me so enthralled that I lost track of time and read and read. When I realised what I had done I decided it was safest to stay hidden and unknown until the morning exodus was fully over and then sneak out and make my way into class undetected. At school I would say that I had needed to stay in the toilet with an upset stomach for a long time. This would serve for the unsuspecting teachers.

I waited a bit longer until when all was quiet, just to be safe. Then I surreptitiously made my way out of the room and to the top of the stairs that brought me down to the front entrance. The front door was closed but I knew it would not be bolted and locked.

I was about to begin my descent when one big hand grabbed me around the collar and the other hand reefed me by the ear. It was Gus, bigger and uglier than ever, and he laughed nastily. It seemed he had silently walked out of the other room at the top of the stairs just when I had come out of my doorway. He looked at me, licking his lips. His crotch bulged as his thoughts turned to lust.

"Look what I have found," he chuckled, letting go of my collar and beginning to undo his belt with his now free hand while keeping my ear firmly held by his second hand. "I have been thinking it was time I gave you a good fucking. Today is my lucky day." he said, in obvious anticipation.

He part pulled down his pants to show me what was on offer, standing in front of me, next to the top of the stairs.

I had just been reading a scene from the Breaker about how Harry took on all comers in a barroom fight. Something of the heroics of Harry's fighting against the odds ran through me now.

In that instant I made a brave decision that today I was not going to be a patsy and submit to a bully. I looked hard at him, summoning courage, and took a deep breath, gathering my wits. I was determined to get away and, if I could just break his ear hold, I thought I had speed and nimbleness on my side, particularly with his pants half down. He seemed oblivious to any of my plans, lost in a world of desire.

Now or never I thought, moving towards him rather than pushing away. Then, when my head was almost in his bloated belly, I shoved him with all my might and pushing myself sideways as I did, so as to get away from him. My ear felt half torn off but I was free.

I watched with morbid fascination as he stood teetering backwards at the top of the stairs, arms flailing in the air as he sought for balance. Then gravity took over and he tumbled down the stairs, head over heels in a couple backwards somersaults, almost acrobatic except for his ponderous bulk. There was a heavy dull thunk as he landed, headfirst, at the bottom of the stairs. Then the silence was absolute.

He did not move, I saw no breaths, he did not make any sound, he just lay there with his head twisted at a funny angle, half under his shoulder with an outstretched arm. For maybe a minute of two, I stood there silently and looked at him, expecting at any moment he would suddenly rise to his feet, roaring in rage like a resurrected monster and come at me. But nothing happened. He stayed where he lay, completely motionless. I hoped he had knocked himself unconscious and would have no memory of what had passed. I dared not to hope for more.

A distant outside sound startled me from my trance. I saw my schoolbag lying at my feet and picked it up, looping the strap over my shoulder and tentatively inched my way downstairs. When I came to the place at the bottom where his bulk filled the stairs, I climbed over the rail and down the other side to avoid any contact or chance for him to reach me, even yet. Still he had not moved and I dared to hope it was more than just unconsciousness.

The door was unlocked so I opened it, looked around to ensure no one was in view and walked off to school knowing, for the first time, that wild exultant joy of the hunter who had made a good kill. My mind had not quite processed that he was really dead. Yet I knew with certainty that he was going nowhere and would trouble me or others no more; that he would be lying there unmoved when school children returned and the next shift of warders came in.

It was so. I was not really that late, the assembly was still in progress when I arrived and I blended into my class with none the wiser as to where I had been. When I returned that afternoon with the other boys, there were two policemen standing guard over the body while the coroner came. A short while later they carried him away.

The police brought us, one by one, to be questioned as to our knowledge of what had happened. Nobody had seen anything, nobody knew anything, he was there at breakfast in the morning and the warders on the new shift, coming in that afternoon, an hour before school returned, found him lying thus. The coroner said he had been dead for several hours. Apart from a broken neck, his belt undone and pants part down, there was nothing suspicious. It was ruled death by misadventure; that he had tripped, lost his balance and fallen down the stairs. As

to why he pants were half undone it was thought he had been to the toilet and was still doing them up when he tripped. Only I knew and rejoiced in secret. It seemed almost too easy to be true.

Chapter 6

Escape to Nowhere.

With Gus gone my mind was filled with heroics and wild dreams. Just like my hero, the Breaker, I had triumphed against the odds. So now I must fulfil my destiny, to follow in his footsteps and make good my escape.

I had no money and no clothes except my remand home garb, but these seemed like small problems. However I knew I must have a plan of where to go, at least in general terms, as if I did not come home one night they would search for me in and around the locality. So, by then, I must be well away and going somewhere. I used the maps in the library to map out a route, first to get a train to take me out of Melbourne to a nearby country town through which a main road ran, then to get lifts to take me on from there.

I solved my first problem of clothes by carefully taking odd items from the school locker rooms when sport was on; a tee shirt here, a jacket there, some pants that almost fit me. The money problem was solved in the same way; a dollar here, two dollars there. I soon had over twenty dollars in my pocket and that seemed more than enough. When a month had passed I decided it was time. I rolled a blanket from another bed in the room into my school bag and headed away, as if going to school, except I was heading for the station. The train took me to a little country town an hour west of Melbourne. I got directions out of town to the main highway west and there I found a roadside truck stop where the truckies pulled up to sleep and check their loads. I thought of asking for a lift but realised that there was a stream of empty trucks heading out into the country to collect wool and wheat to bring it in to Melbourne. With no goods in the back the drivers had little interest in checking their loads. In this way I got half way to Adelaide before I left my first uninvited lift. At another truck stop I exchanged this for a truck with a full load headed for Adelaide. It was loaded high with bales of wool for a ship there. While the driver ate and chatted to my former lift I climbed on board and burrowed down into a gap between bales where I found a comfortable bed.

In Adelaide I realised it was not hard to find bits of work and earn a few dollars here and there, and there were always extra things for the taking. I saved my money until I had enough to go to an RM Williams store for a stockman's outfit; hat, checked shirt, moleskins, and of course a set of riding boots, my pride and joy.

I was now thirteen and a half and although scrawny my shoulders were beginning to widen and my voice to deepen. I really felt like I was becoming a man. After another three months in Adelaide I had a stash of a few hundred dollars, mostly earned from doing odd jobs. I had pretty much given up on the need to

steal for a living as I earned enough to support myself in a basic way, at odd times spending a night in a hostel where I could get a shower and a feed for a minimum cost, at other times sleeping in a private nook under a little used bridge where no one bothered me.

My life was fine. The freedom to come and go as I pleased gave me a strange exhilaration when I remembered back to my life in the remand home and even my life, before keeping out of my father's way. But it was not really fun; it was just a day to day existence. I had a few passing acquaintances but no real friends. For now it suited me this way as it kept me free of ties.

But I knew there must be more to life than this day to day existence and I felt a calling to head out into the land of distant horizons, as the poetry writers called it. So I started to check out my options to find work out there somewhere. I started to read the job pages of the Adelaide papers, looking for something that may suit. After a week I noticed an advertisement for jackeroos on a station to the north somewhere. It was a place I had never heard of but I found it on the map in the library. It looked to be a good way north of Adelaide, somewhere around the Flinders Ranges. I gathered it ran sheep. The application required posting a letter with references but I did not have any of those, so at first I thought of that as a setback. Plus I was not really sure how one would go about writing a letter and what one could say in it. Teenage boy, escaped from Sunnyside Remand Home did not sound like much a story to win a place, and I did not have any photographs, relevant experience, exam results, qualification papers or other things that would look good, so I let it pass.

But then the same ad appeared in the paper the following week and the week after that as well. At that point I figured there were either a lot of jobs going or they had not got many applicants, so I thought, "Maybe I had better just go there and apply in person."

I found a train line went most of the way and bought a ticket. It brought me to a little town called Quorn and, as I walked up the small dusty street, I felt I was really getting closer to the place I wanted to be.

I bought an ice cream in the shop in the main street and sat there licking it as I surveyed the passing scene. Soon enough a man with a big wide hat, boots and pants like mine, though not a checked shirt, just a faded blue one, pulled up in a utility and got out, striding into the shop. His boots were dusty and his pants were marked with dirt and scuff marks. He walked with the bandy legged gait I had heard about in horsemen who spent hours in the saddle. I figured he knew his way around the stations up here and would probably know the best way to get to where I was heading.

So as he came back out with some items in a bag, I stood up straight and said to him in my most respectful voice, "Excuse me sir, can you tell me how I can get to Oorooroo Station?"

He sized me up, giving me a careful up and down inspection with his eyes, "Why do you ask?"

I stammered out. "I heard there was jobs going there for jackaroos and I was hoping to get one."

At that he roared laughing. As that subsided he asked, in an almost polite voice, "And what is your name, lad. For a second I stood there dumbfounded, the answer

to this question was not something I had thought about. At the remand centre they had called me Vincent Bassingham, or sometimes VB based on that famous beer brand. I did not mind VB though I hated Vincent, it was my father's name. But rather than arguing back at the remand centre it was easier to let it go. So it was something I had accepted as a reluctant label. By now I had almost got used to hearing it used for me and had conditioned myself to respond when it was called.

But I wanted a new life with a new identity, not one which linked me to my past.

In my hesitation the man raised his eyebrows, "Eh, how about a name, sonny boy? I assume that you have one that people call you by, you know a moniker."

It came to me in a flash, "Mark, Mark BBb, Mark Brown."

"Well Mark, BB Brown, it seems that this is both our lucky days. Happens I am from there and I just drove into town to get a few things and have returned with a new jackaroo.

"Jack is my name, Jack JJ Jones, head stockman at Oorooro Station. I was really looking for someone a bit bigger and stronger, maybe a couple years older, but seeing as you are here there is no point you standing in the sunshine, you might as well come along with me and we will see what you can do. At least you have a stockmans outfit, RM boots and all. You would be surprised how many turn up here, even from other posh stations down south with nothing but city clothes."

With that he pointed to the passenger seat in his utility, "Well, hop in lad, I assume you are coming with me. No point sitting here in the sun, there's work to be done!"

Chapter 7

Another One Bites the Dust.

And so I had a job. Straightaway Jack and I hit it off in our own way. I think he liked my willingness to try and I liked his willingness to give me a go with no further questions asked.

That night I slept in a bunk bed in a room with two other boys, maybe two years older than me, one was Danny and the other was Rod, they were friends from down south, from a small town near Mount Gambier. They had got this job together and while they were not rude they showed very little interest in me, the new boy.

For the first couple days Jack largely took me under his wing, working out what I knew how to do, and the things about which I had no clue. On the first morning he brought me to the saddle room where all the saddles, bridles and other tack were stored. He showed me how to strip down a saddle and bridle and how to clean and oil the parts. Then he set me to work for a couple hours on my own. My job was to give all the other saddles and bridles their own clean up and oil.

Jack came back just before lunch and expressed pleasure at what I had done. I had rubbed and polished them all until the leather shone and the metal parts gleamed.

He patted me on the shoulder, "Well done, lad! After lunch we will try the next stage; see how you go with putting one of these on a horse and then getting on that horse yourself."

I felt inordinately proud at his praise, something rare in my past life.

And so it was. After lunch he led me to a yard down by the creek where several horses were standing in the shade of a big old tree.

He pointed out a horse with a big blaze on his forehead. "Reckon that is the one for you to begin on, he's steady, Blaze is his name. Why don't you catch him and saddle him up and when you're set give me a call.

Looking at that horse brought back the memory of one of the few happy times in my life, a time when a short lasting friend from the country had invited me to come and stay at their farm a couple hours' drive out of Melbourne in rolling hilly countryside. I had been maybe seven, perhaps a year before my Mum died. It was a wonderful week with the two of us going riding most days together and also using his father's twenty two rifle to hunt rabbits. I had been unafraid riding a large horse which responded well for his novice rider. In that week I had learned the basics of horse handling, how to catch and saddle a horse, how to pick up its feet and how to mount, even though I had needed a drum to get up to the stirrup. But that experience had stayed with me. Now I was unafraid and happy to do as told.

So, almost before I knew it, I had put a bridle on and then a saddle. I measured the length of the stirrup against my arm, the way I had been shown, checked the girth for tightness and was ready to climb on when I remembered to call Jack to check.

He did a careful check and nodded with a grin, "Not bad for an amateur, you've even done the girth up tight enough. Are you ready to climb on and give him a ride?"

I nodded and grinned back, "You bet!"

So he caught and brought round his own horse then indicated for me to mount up and walk around the yard a couple times. Once he was satisfied I was settled in the saddle he opened the gate and quickly swung on board his own skittish colt, much more lively than my placid gelding.

For the next week every afternoon I rode out with Jack and he familiarised me with the station layout and tricks for working sheep. He had been raised on cattle and only half liked sheep, 'ground lice', he called them, saying they drove him mad with their mob behaviour and stupidity, that he was forever needing to hold himself back from riding his horse straight over the top of them.

But he was a good teacher and showed me how to get them to run as a mob, how work them through gates and how to cut out an animal from the rest. These afternoons seemed to give him as much pleasure as myself, he would tell me little stories about how to read the signs of the bush as we rode, and I could feel my confidence and ability rise rapidly.

Within a couple days he told me he was happy for me to ride on my own as he was happy I had mastered the first steps to becoming a horseman. He praised my ability to manage my horse calmly and get it working for me.

In the mornings Jack assigned me other jobs around the homestead, learning the basics of station work and maintenance. One day I was given a job of stripping down a windmill pump under the tutelage of the station mechanic, a sour and grumpy man named Jim, another day my task was to weed the station vegetable garden, yet another day it was to clean out the muck from one of the shearing sheds in preparation for its use when the shearers came in a month's time.

I applied myself to all this work with enthusiasm. Truth be told I liked and wanted to impress Jack. He had become something between an older brother and father figure to me.

Evenings Jack went off to his own house, set down towards the creek away from the rest of the station houses. The bunkhouse where I and the other jackaroos lived was about a hundred yards from the big house where the owner lived with the shearing shed and sheep yards on the other side from us. I suppose us being close to it kept the noise and smell away from the big house a bit.

Next to our bunk house was another building. It was both a communal kitchen and a sitting room with a few lounge chairs and a stand with books and magazines at the other end of the dining room where we ate our meals. A cook fixed meals six days a week and on the Sunday left out enough cold meat and bread for us to feed ourselves.

So life drifted by for about a month. The owner was away down in Adelaide and Jack, as head stockman, was in charge. He was a good boss that all of us liked, except maybe Jim, but Jim seemed to grumble at anything.

It was a good season and there was plenty of grass and water for the stock so the work was not too hard, just regular checking of the paddocks and waters to make sure all was well. It was late winter and the ewes were set to begin lambing from early spring which was when the owner would return and the real work would begin. In the meantime, we got everything ready and waited.

The station was over ten thousand acres and ran about ten thousand sheep. Spring was lambing season and then, soon after, shearing season. While we waited I practised my riding on Blaze and, as I got confident on him, Jack tried me out on a couple other free spirited horses which I mastered too.

I found myself comfortably fitting into station life, looking with excited anticipation to a time coming soon when the real station work would begin. In the meantime I soaked up all the learning I could.

Soon enough it was spring and we were frantically busy, shearing, ewes with lambs everywhere, marking and drenching, moving sheep between paddocks, spraying to protect against fly strike as the weather warmed. Some days I worked in the yards drafting and marking sheep, some days I rode out to muster paddocks with other jackaroos and occasionally Jack, some days I helped in the shearing shed doing rouseabout duties. My fitness improved rapidly from all the activity and I could feel muscles that I never knew I had. It was hard and exhausting but I ate better than I ever had and my head would barely touch the pillow before I was asleep.

I felt incredibly proud of my contribution to all this activity as the wool bale pile mounted daily from the shearing and the newly shorn sheep, with their baby lambs bleating, filled my world.

All too soon it was over for the year, new white sheep settling into summer grazing paddocks, lambs growing big and fat as they gorged on the saltbush. I had become friends of a sort with the five other jackaroos that mostly worked with me in the stock handling, though when the day was over they, being all of an age, they mostly went off together, leaving me as the young chum to entertain myself alone.

In the evenings I would go down to the horse yards, mainly to watch the horses do their thing, but also to groom them, pull the burs out of their tails, polish the tack and otherwise keep myself entertained and busy.

At these times, when it was just me and the horses together, it felt like I could almost talk to them in their language. They, in their own way, seemed to listen and pay attention to whatever I said. I had never had a pet and my school friends had been few. So, on these evenings when it was just the horses and me, it felt as if I had made new group of friends.

A few times, on these quiet evenings Jack, or JJ as I now often called him, wandered down there too. We would stand leaning on the yard rails, side by side, talking about the various horses, their individual characters and what made different ones good or bad. It was clear that good stock horses were a great love of JJs. He told me how, in his early life, he had worked as a horse breaker and had also done some droving, far out in the channel country of western Queensland, in places where they still walked the big bullock mobs slowly along the river flood-outs, fattening them as they walked and ate the lush pasture.

I found the idea of horse breaking to be of great fascination, the idea of taking a wild animal and getting it used to people, of it then allowing itself be handled and ridden by people much smaller and weaker than it was, seemed totally amazing.

So I quizzed Jack endlessly on how this was done, how long it took to break a horse, whether you needed brute force to subdue a horse or if gentleness worked best.

After two of three afternoons of quizzing him, one day he said, "Let's not talk about it anymore, there are two young ones here that need to be broken to get them ready for work in the stock camp next year. I was going to leave them until I come back in the New Year. But if you are keen we can make a start on them now, a couple hours each afternoon for a week or two, after the other work of the day is done. That should get them well on their way before I go away.

Two days later Jack and I met up at the yards at about four o'clock, he had the two horses, both geldings, one bay and one black, standing there, nervously snorting and stamping. He told me to take my pick, we would each work mostly on one and that gave us naming rights.

I chose that black, there was something curious, almost friendly, but uncompromising in the way he looked at me over that connected with me. I named him Midnight on first impulse, it seemed to fit.

The other one was a high spirited bay, more foot stamping and head tossing than his mate, which fell to Jack. He laughed and said, "Well lad, he reminds of me of stories told of the Breaker of old, one to break or be broken by. He will lead

me a pretty dance, may even spit me off a time or two before he is done. So Breaker is his name; may the best man or horse win!"

We set to, first getting them used to a head rope and bridle, then working around them, handling feet and flanks, using ropes to control, bagging and putting on a saddle, and lunging on a long rein to teach them commands. I loved it, the instant communication I felt with these horses, the way they responded to my lightest touch, a hand over the withers sending a shiver along their back, a flick of the whip or the reins as they circled causing an instant reaction. After a week of ground work Jack said it was time to get aboard. He gave me the option to go first which I took.

With butterflies in my stomach I led Midnight into the middle of the round yard and prepared to mount. Jack had schooled me on how to make the move on a quiet stock horse and I could go from ground to horseback in one flowing motion in a bare second.

So I did. Midnight stood stock still for a second then was off, muscles bunched he surged forward, treating me as if I was an irrelevant feather astride. For a few seconds he jumped and twisted, while I followed Jack's instructions to keep my weight back and balance centred. It was wildly exhilarating as the horse did its buckjump dance. Then it was over, done, performance given. Midnight calmly walked around the yard. I asserted control and soon I had him effortlessly trotting and cantering. My body was joined to his movements, a single piece of fluidity. It was wonderful.

Jack clapped and said, "Well done lad, you are a natural, watching you ride was a thing pretty to see. If you keep that up one day you will go far as a horse breaker or even a rodeo rider."

Then Jack swung aboard himself. His ride was much tougher. This horse had a mean streak and was out to unmount him. For a few seconds it was touch and go whether he would be unseated, as the horse twisted below him and his body looked in danger of parting ways. But he stayed there and after a few more seconds the wild rushes subsided. Then it too was another almost docile mount. Jack was grinning from ear to ear and I was grinning too as we shared our success.

After another week of yard and close-in paddock work Jack declared both horses were ready for serious stock work next year. They were put out to run free until then.

Otherwise work rolled along. With Jack telling of my new found horse breaking prowess known I detected a touch more respect from the older jackeroos. They were all competent riders but it seemed they looked up to me for my new found skills in horsemanship.

The days were getting hotter as summer rolled around; the distant hills rising into the Flinders Ranges, once lost in early morning winter mist, now shimmered with a heat haze in the midday sun.

Once I was invited with the other boys for a Sunday lunch in the big station house. We met the owner and his young pretty wife and were all on our best behaviour over a joint of lamb. The other boys told of the farms they had come from and of their lives and families down south. I found I had little to say, my story did not bear telling, however it was as if no one noticed my silence. Jack had

obviously put in a good word for me with the boss, a mid-sized youngish man called Jeremy Black. He patted me on the shoulder as I left and told me to keep up the good work.

We were all unsure what would happen when full summer came, we understood it would be too hot for serious work and only a skeleton staff would remain.

Jack told us that one of us would be kept on, along with the mechanic and himself. Summer's main job would be check the sheep and the water each day as well as do general maintenance tasks like fixing windmills and fences in the cooler morning. Then in the hot afternoon the work would be more in the shade.

It was obvious the other boys were all keen to return to their families' farms over the Christmas holiday time. So the prediction was that I would be kept on to assist Jack in the odd jobs needed. Then Jack got a letter from his Mum saying his Dad was sick and he needed to go home for a bit. So it was agreed that he would go off for six weeks of holidays from before Christmas until the end of January to stay with his family who lived in Tasmania.

There was discussion about whether they needed to find another worker to help me out, but in the end it was agreed that I should be able to manage on my own and could always ask Jeremy to help if needed.

Jeremy said he was happy to get on a horse and come out for a day or two if needed. Thus far I had barely seen him at the sheep yards and never out and about on the station or on a horse, though it was said he owned a string of racehorses in Adelaide.

So it seemed likely it would be just me and the mechanic keeping the place running with at most very occasional help from the owner if it was needed over the middle of summer.

I found the mechanic neither friendly nor pleasant to deal with. Still, despite a grouchy manner, he seemed to know his job. So, to date, I tolerated him while I generally kept out of his way.

In return it was clear he did not much like me, having been heard to say things like 'Jack's little flunkie' about me when Jack was out of earshot. But he maintained a veneer of politeness when Jack or the owner was around.

All too soon the others were packed and leaving. Jack left last, giving me a firm pat on the shoulder and a trademark grin as he said, "Hope to see you again next year, young fella."

I hoped I would see him again too. He was one of the very few people I had ever really liked.

The first week on my own I largely did station clean up chores, cleaning out the shearing shed, fixing fences and cleaning up gardens, repairs to saddles and other tack. These jobs would fill up the hot afternoons and the mornings were given over to checking the sheep.

I was happy working away keeping to myself, with occasional distant views of the station owner or his wife. Jack had set me a list of tasks to do and I steadily worked my way through these. Once these were done I knew my main job would be doing a careful circuit of the paddocks on a horse twice a week to make sure that sheep were well and there was enough water in the tanks. I had been told I should be back by about lunch time as it was too hot to be out in the early afternoon, with the thermometer in the shade mostly well above 40 degrees.

As I went around it was my job to fix any fence damage I found. It all seemed simple as by now I knew my way all around the run. It did mean many hours in the saddle but that was a pleasure as I practised my riding and stock work skills as I went along' I also took great delight in getting to know the lie of the land and all the plants and animals which lived there. I tried to make sure I was back in time for a late lunch. Despite the heat, I found I could keep working though out the day well enough.

The station comprised twenty one biggish paddocks, each with about 500 sheep, and the water for them came from sixteen windmills. These pumped up water from bores and wells which drew off an underground spring called the Great Artesian basin which covered most of inland Australia, or so Jack had told me. Each windmill had a tank next to it to hold the water on days when there was no wind. This tank would last the sheep for at least a week when the wind did not blow though, on most days, there was enough wind to keep the tanks full. The windmills sat in places where paddocks met with a trough to each side.

So my task was to ride a third of the paddocks each day, doing a sweep in and around the water to look for any sheep that were sick or injured as well as checking the water was clean and flowing into the trough, and the tank was over half full.

If any tank got below half full I was to let Jeremy know so that he or the mechanic could come out with a pump on the utility to pump the water level in the tank up to the top again. Every second time I did a circuit of paddocks, and at least once a week, I would ride the whole fence line of each paddock to check it was intact with no escapees.

One evening, just as I was settling down to a simple dinner, there was a knock on the mess door where I ate by myself, eating whatever the station owners wife had left for the day as the cook was gone. I did not know where the mechanic, Jim, was or ate. I had barely seen him since Jack left.

Now it was Jim knocking on the door saying. "You have had a nice easy week of it since Jack left. Starting from tomorrow, at daybreak, you will be helping me. I have the job of pulling up each of the windmill pumps, stripping it and fitting new seals to keep it going for the next year. I have been told you are to be my helper. I don't think much of that, you look too scrawny and useless to serve any real value. But, as the boss said so, I suppose I had better bring you along."

There was something in the way he looked at me and talked to me that marked him out as a bully, much like many others I had known. I refused to be drawn into asking him about the job, just saying, "OK, I will be waiting for you at first light out the front of here. I am happy to help you."

Another week passed with me following Jim around as his helper. The more I saw of him the less I liked him. He had a nasty expression most of the time as he watched me. He always looked for the hardest jobs for me to do and would scream abuse at how I did them, no matter how I tried.

When we stripped a well pump he would give me the heavy job of hauling it up twenty feet in the air to the windmill platform while he sat back with a cigarette. Slowly and laboriously I would raise the pump using a block and tackle, then I carefully tied off the rope to hold it in place.

As I worked to strip it, Jim would stand over my shoulder directing how to pull it apart. It was not obvious what he did apart from bossing me around. Jim said the boss had set us the task of doing a pump a day, starting early each morning. Once this job was done Jim would slouch off to his room in the shade of the verandah.

But my days work was only half done. So I would go, catch and saddle a horse to ride out and check the paddocks, despite previous instructions of not doing it in the heat. I mostly got home when it was near on dark.

I survived a second week of Jim endless nasty comments. Now he was starting to hit me each time I turned my back. And he had taken to dropping things from the windmill towers. I was sure it was deliberate. Each time he dropped something, like a spanner, I was sent down to pick it up while he sat on the platform and smoked. Often I had only just got back to the top when he would, 'accidentally on purpose' drop another thing down which I would have to climb down and collect all over again.

Often, as I was clambering back up, he would let out a nasty little cackle as if to say, 'what shall I do to annoy you next?' Worst of all he now carried around a length of black plastic water pipe, two inches thick and over two feet long. He would hit me across the knuckles with it as I worked, to try and make me drop my tools. At other times, when my back was turned, he would use it to direct a sharp cut across my back or shoulders. It was clear to me that he was trying to torment me to a point where I lashed out at him. It seemed he thought that if I reacted to his tormenting then he would have an excuse to give me a major beating. He obviously thought that with plenty of size and weight on his size it was something he could easily do.

I was used to bullies and absorbing pain without giving any sign so I was determined not to give him the satisfaction of flinching or crying out. I made myself suppress the rage each time he hurt me but it was slowly starting to get to me. I could feel a wild anger start to bubble up inside me.

A couple times, as I looked at him, I remembered the great satisfaction I had felt after my action in pushing Gus backwards down the stairs. It was not yet a planned thing, but I started to think what it would be like to give him a big push from the top of a windmill stand, twenty feet above the ground. Of course, if he landed on soft dirt and only hurt himself a bit, he would come after me and beat me far worse. While I had grown in the last year he was still a good foot taller than me and at least double my weight. But the odds of him coming after me did not deter me.

Late in the second week he managed to make my knuckles bleed from a well-directed hit with the black pipe when he deemed I was too slow tightening the bolts on a pump. At this a thing inside me turned from tolerance and avoidance to sharp anger. I was sick of his bullying and I was sick of him, the nasty miserable man that he was.

On that day my mind I decided I would square the ledger when the chance came, just like I did with Gus. A couple more days went by with no good chances and many more well directed blows from him. But I bit down on my tongue and held my patience as I waited for my chance.

Then came a day when the mill was on a little rocky knoll. The ground was a good twenty feet below and was littered with rocks poking up at all odd angles. I eyed these rocks off and thought, *if he falls and lands on these it won't end well for him, particularly if he goes over head first.*

Today he was particularly nasty, first belting me on the hand to make me drop the spanner over the side that I was using and then, when I stood up to climb down to get it, delivering a second blow across my face with the same pipe while screaming, 'You useless fucker, see what you have done.'

As he was standing there, an arm's length away on the platform, waving the pipe at me something in my brain clicked. I knew the chance had come to turn the tables, now was the hour.

I licked my cut lip, tasted blood, and savoured this along with another taste, that of revenge. I watched the pipe start to swing towards me for a second blow. In that instant before it reached me I stepped inside its sweep, moving in close to the steel windmill frame. I grabbed the pipe end with one hand then both as it whistled past my face.

Now he held one end and I held the other. I jammed my back hard into the windmill frame and shoved the pipe back at him, watching as it pushed him backwards. At the edge of the platform his foot went behind him to keep balance, except his foot stepped into empty air. His whole body rocked and wavered backwards. He tried to pull back on the pipe so as to pull himself towards me and regain his footing. As he did I let my end of the pipe go.

For half a second he looked at me, part enraged, part puzzled. Then he tipped fully backwards and disappeared over the edge. I think he was too shocked to scream. A silent second passed and then a loud thud. I looked over the side to see a puff of dust rise from the dried ground below, momentarily blocking my view of what lay below it. Like the time before there was silence. I looked again, the dust had cleared. I saw he was lying on his back, spreadeagled over large rocks.

I let out a spontaneous cheer, thinking *the hunter strikes again, another bully bites the dust.*

I look back now and wonder if I should have felt some guilt and remorse, but in truth I felt none, only gladness that a nasty and rotten bully would trouble me and the world no more. I wanted him out of my life so he could hit and abuse me no more. I knew dead was far the best way.

It was strange to have to go back to the station to report the mechanic, Jim's, accidental death. Jack had given me a couple driving lessons in the ute we were using. So, even though I had never driven it on my own, I knew how to make it go and could steer and work the clutch and gears.

Before I left I sat for a minute and thought how I would tell it. I looked around the site. There was little to see, the tools and pump parts sat on the back of the truck apart from what was up on the windmill landing. There was little to see on the ground apart from some freshly scuffed ground where we had walked back and forth between the vehicle and the ladder which took us up the windmill, a steel frame construction bolted to the side of the mill. Then there was my single set of footprints where I had walked over to the body spreadeagled on the rocks, just to make sure he really was dead. I had not touched him, just looked but I could clearly see where the back of his head was caved in where it had smashed

into a protruding rock. The plastic pipe in his hand lay a few feet from where he had landed. I knew it would have my fingerprints on it like all the other things. But I reasoned that was to be expected as we jointly handled all the gear that was here.

I climbed the ladder to the top and checked the windmill platform. The block and tackle with pump suspended, rope tied off to hold it up, were as I left them. There was a pile of tools and gear for the pump repairs, some in a neat pile, a few bits spread out; a shifter spanner, big screwdriver and an old rag to wipe off the extra oil. It was typical and unremarkable.

I worked out the story I would tell in my head. I would say that Jim had picked up the big shifter to loosen the main nuts holding the pump in place. It had slipped from his hand and fallen to the ground. So he had sent me down to retrieve it.

I would say I was not looking at what he was doing as I was on my way down to get the shifter, when I heard a shout and a thud as he fell and hit the ground. I did not know what happened but thought he must have slipped. It sounded reasonable and believable. I looked at the big shifter at my feet and kicked it over the edge, watching it land in the dirt and bushes below. *Let the police find it there to confirm my story*, I thought.

Satisfied my story would hold up I got in the car and drove back to the station. It was still early in the morning.

I could see Jeremy and his wife, Sarah, sitting on the verandah, drinking tea. As I stopped the car I felt my nerves jangling at the thought of telling this lie and making them believe it. That was good, it would give me the anxious demeanour required to tell this tale properly.

So I ran up to where they sat, calling out, "Help, Help, Jim has fallen from the windmill and I think he is dead."

They both looked suitably shocked. Once I had told them the bare facts, Jeremy went off to telephone the police while Sarah at first put her arms around me in a spontaneous hug, saying how awful it must have been for me. Then she went off to make me my own cup of tea and slice of toast.

When Jeremy came back I told them how Jim's head was caved in, how his eyes were wide open and staring and that he had not taken a breath or moved in the five minutes I watched him. As a result I was sure he was dead.

So it was agreed there was no point in going back to him until the police arrived. It took over an hour until they came. Jeremy drove the utility to show the way while I sat in the passenger seat and the police car followed.

When we got there the crows had already been at work, pecking out his eyes and tearing into his face, which made him look much worse. Jeremy had to cover his mouth to stop getting sick. I was not upset but glad, pleased that in death the crows had done their part in disfiguring the horrible bastard. Still I feigned a measure of horror and disgust lest they think me callous.

After half an hour of standing around, while the police examined the body and the site, they sent me and Jeremy away while they stayed and continued their investigation. In the mid afternoon, after the body was gone for the coroner to post mortem in Port Augusta, the policemen returned to the station house to take formal statements from me and Jeremy.

I heard one of the policemen talking to Jeremy. Even though he was speaking quietly I could clearly hear his words, “I am sure the coroner will find that Jim died as a result of the fall, the way it smashed his head. I expect this means the inquest will conclude death by misadventure due to a fall from the windmill stand. It’s just one of those things that happens out here—life is hard and dangerous!

Chapter 8

Footsteps of the Breaker.

That night I stayed in the big house, fussed over and petted by both Jeremy and Rachel, who were sure I had had an awful shock and needed mothering. As I sat waiting for dinner to be served I saw a copy of the Breaker book sitting on the bookshelf. It was the same book I had read many months ago at remand school. That copy was left behind when I ran.

I asked Jeremy if he minded if I had a look at it. He took it down from the shelf. He handed it to me saying stories were still being told of the Breaker at the places he worked on around here from more than 100 years ago.

I told him I had read a little of the book in my school library but never got the chance to finish it.

With that he took told me it was mine to keep.

I accepted it with real pleasure; it was the most valued gift I could remember.

As I sat there reading it, it all came flooding back to me, this man, Harry Morant’s story. I reread a part I remembered from before, when the Breaker said, when he had beaten Sims a second time around. He said to his mate, Paddy, “I enjoyed that, feeling the bones go, I liked it.”

It was exactly what I had felt as, first on that day with Gus at the remand home, and then again today with Jim, as each had smashed into the ground, instantly finishing their lives. In each case I felt immense satisfaction at what happened. And I liked my role in it. As I sat there replaying it in my mind, I took delight in what I had caused, with no shadow of regret. That very brief second or two of terror that each had known as it happened felt good to me and them being dead was even better.

Dinner passed with a sense of unreality, mostly it was spent making polite conversation of nothing much to do about anything. At one stage I asked what they would do with their mechanic gone.

Jeremy said he had rung his nearest neighbour, who was a good friend, this afternoon. This man had a couple stockmen he could spare. So while I could stay on for as long as I wanted, if I wanted to have a break, at least for a few days, to go home and see my family they could spare me for a bit. He went on to say that, if I did, he was hoping I would come back and work with them next season. He thought I had a good head for stock handling and other station work and would do well in the industry.

This praise made me feel ten feet tall. The one thing that worried me was my lack of a real identity. The station had signed me on as Mark Brown and that was the name I had given the police yesterday.

But when the police had asked for my home address today I struggled until I remembered the address of a boarding house where I had stayed in Adelaide. So I used this as my home address. I was in a poor part of Adelaide and fitted with the story I had constructed about my parents living there in a simple house without much money to spare. But I knew that, soon enough, someone would call to check there and no one would have any clue about who I was.

So the offer to go away seemed like a godsend as I could say I was going to visit my family and head off in another direction. With the wages I had earned since I had been here, and with almost nothing to spend my money on, I had almost three hundred dollars. That seemed a vast sum to me and meant I had money to travel for a good while before I needed any more.

The only thing that turned me off going was my friendship with Jack. I was looking forward to seeing him again when he came back from holidays, telling him all my news and hearing his stories. But now, as I imagined him coming back, full of good cheer and then finding out about Jim and my supposed finding him, I could picture JJ saying, "Mark B, what in God's name happened? How did Jim come to fall?"

With a flash of insight I knew I could not lie to him the way I lied to everyone else. I would not do that to this person who was my friend. If JJ asked me, which he surely would, I could not in good conscience tell him a bald faced lie. And I could not tell him the truth. What that meant was that I could not let him ask me! Which meant that I could not still be here when he came back.

With that truth worked out in my mind it was plain what I had to do, to leave as if returning to my family, but then go a different way to some place far from here. So that was my decision made.

Next morning I headed away. I asked to be dropped at the station on the pretext of returning to Adelaide. Jeremy and Sarah both came to send me off. Jeremy gave me a brief handshake and Sarah gave me a tight hug. I found myself suddenly aware of her feminine body pressed to mine. It seemed she felt it too; she blushed as she let me go.

Jeremy handed me an envelope and a return train ticket to Adelaide, "That's your wages and bit more to keep you going, something to cover a holiday. Plus your train ticket - I have got you an open return ticket to bring you back here when you are ready. Hope to see you back next year but either way we wish you well!"

So I boarded the train and waved them goodbye as the train pulled away. I felt grateful to them for their kindness, though I could see that they and me were light years apart in where we came from, them born with a silver spoon of the richness of their land, me dragging myself into a future the hard way. But despite our differences I could feel they were good people. It was a pity that I would see them no more.

As the train rolled away towards Adelaide I sat there reading about the Breaker and the death of his first horse Cavalier, then how he found his new horse Harlequin in a mob of wild brumbies, run in from the mountains. There was

something in the allure of Harry mustering brumbies in the hills that resonated powerfully with me, Harry had done that and got his best ever horse that way, perhaps I could follow in his footsteps after a fashion.

So by the time the train pulled into Adelaide, some hours later I had decided to travel on to Renmark. It seemed it was one of Harry's favoured places on the mighty Murray River. And it was where he had joined the army for Africa, his final adventure, even though it brought his undoing. So it seemed like the right place to go. Maybe, after I went there, I would look for some work in the high country, perhaps even running and rounding up wild horses as told by Banjo Patterson in the Man from Snowy River.

It was a plan of sorts, to follow in the footsteps of the Breaker, a true hero of both Australian legend and my imagination.

* * * * *

Back in Adelaide I found the train to Renmark no longer ran, it had closed some years ago. Instead I found a coach to carry me forward on my journey. It brought me this river town late in the night.

The next day I wandered around the empty streets, it was getting towards a hundred years since Harry had made his fateful decision to enlist and there was little to show for it in this town, it was now part of the heartland of the Riverland, a place of orange trees and agriculture, but with little sign of horses or its early past save for odd old buildings and museums.

Certainly there was little work for drovers or horse-breakers or even jackeroos working stock. A stock and station agent told me about a selection of jobs, but the adventure seemed to be lacking, so I took myself to the library to see what more I could find out about this man whose words had inspired me. They had his books and odd words and stories of his life but it seemed long ago and far away.

I tossed up the idea of heading for the high country, far back east where the mountains reached up to touch their heads in the winter snow. But it was the height of summer and there would be little snow there now. It was also back towards Melbourne from which I had originally come and from which I wanted to be far, far, far away.

I read about how Harry had come out from England and first landed at Townsville, a long way north, up in Queensland. It seemed that this place might bring me closer to the Harry of whom I had read. So after two days of wandering the town I caught a Greyhound coach for Brisbane, with many stops along the way and from there another long bus ride to Townsville, nearly to another thousand miles further north. As I stepped out of the bus into the baking heat of a summer's day in Townsville, with a sense of the outback being just beyond, I felt at last I was close to where I belonged, a place to which I might come to fulfil some new unknown destiny.

It was the off season for station work, the wet season time when most places let their men go, but there was other work in Townsville, it was regional centre for a huge part of Queensland, with places like Charters Towers where Harry had also made a name on the inland side and the Barrier Reef, another unknown and mystical place, just over the horizon to the east, somewhere out in that huge expanse of Pacific Ocean.

So I decided that I would stop here a while and see what life offered. As my money was limited, I found an old bridge under which to shelter from the sun and rain and set up my camp there.

Chapter 9

Belonging.

The wet season passed easily in Townsville. I loved the huge thunderstorms that built up in the hills to the west and whipped across the baked streets of the town. I loved the fresh smell that came with the rain and I loved the rank green grass which grew everywhere, in the bush, in the parks and even in the cracks in the roads and gutters. And there was the prickling humidity which suffused the air, a thing like walking into a sauna. Steamy moisture coated everything with a liquid film. After minutes of light work my shirt would drip with sweat, matching my exertion. It felt sharply alive, as if there was a battle between my body and the world around, sharpening me through effort.

I had no trouble finding bits of paid work, stacking supermarket shelves after hours, handing out flyers for the tourist crowd, cleaning up rubbish along the foreshore and in the stinking swamps. I took pleasure in this hard menial work; having active hands left my brain free to think and imagine.

My mind would drift back to that glorious sensation of a powerful horse underneath me, totally aware and connected to me, whether as it bucked and twisted to dislodge me or ran in zigzag lines after a sheep, turning its massive bulk on a pin. I knew I could ride and ride well.

There was a part of my brain which did this unbidden, making an instant connection with these great animals. It gave me an unfathomable bond and let me anticipate their moves and shape my body to them.

So I looked for work in this area and took it when it came along, working as a groom in a riding school which offered tourist rides, helping in the town yards when the livestock sales were on, cadging rides from the cowboys who cut and drafted the stock.

Now they looked for me, calling out 'MB' when they needed help with hard tasks like cutting a mad scrub bull out of a mob. I was fearless and did not ever say no to new horses or challenges. I was willing to try my hand at anything. As time went by more and more stockmen looked out for MB and would throw their bits of work and a few dollars my way.

When not working I took the ferry out to Magnetic Island. Even though it was not the real reef I loved its white sands and sheltered coves to swim. I drew pleasure from glimpses of dolphins as they cruised the waves, I became expert at discovering a hidden koala high in a tree.

There were backpacker hostels scattered around the island. I rarely stayed at these, feeling an outsider to their lifestyle, but I saw and gained familiarity with the well to do young boys and girls from far off countries who frequented them,

those with money to go off and travel the distant world, a thing which seemed far out of my reach.

I had my fourteenth birthday over the summer and could feel my body growing and developing in many strange places, my voice was croaky, there was a fuzzy edge to my lips and chin. And I dreamed hot dreams of some of the women I saw during the day. Once, while I wandered along the shoreline edge of the island, I came across a little beach which was almost completely hidden from outside view. Lying naked in the middle of its sand was a girl who looked like a mermaid, luscious milky skin, curves of rounded body parts, rich dark hair which cascaded around her. A discarded bikini lay on the sand nearby. I crept close, thinking I was silent and wanting to see more.

She lay there, seeming unaware of her watcher, luxuriating, exposing her bare skin to the open air and bright light, her breasts upthrust. After an unknown time, perhaps a few minutes, I inched closer, little by little.

When it seemed I was almost close enough to almost reach out and touch this creature she rolled towards me with a cheeky grin, arching her body, saying, "Boy, I know you are looking at me, here, feast your eyes."

Embarrassed I ran off, not knowing what came next. She watched me flee with a lazy smile, as if disappointed that I was gone so soon. I know now it was an invitation to stay, to reach out, touch her uncovered places, maybe even to join my body with hers. But that man part of me was unknowing.

Three months passed as I drifted about, seemingly at home but not quite. I was offered a job at a tourist place on the island, as yardman and gardener, to be the one who cleaned up the rubbish, trimmed plants and mowed lawns. I was tempted but desired more to reconnect with the men and horses of the outback. Now in March the mustering season was due to start, the rain was already easing, the storms drifting offshore and fading away to mostly wind with little rain.

I got a regular job in the town cattle yards, cleaning out the yards and feeding the stock. It was a good place to meet the station types and inquire about upcoming bush work.

Here I met a contractor, Fred McGorrie, fresh in town. He supplied bulls and bucking horses to the rodeos on the outback circuit. He had a month's work on his small farm fifty miles out of town, needing a person's help to get his livestock mustered and ready for the circuit. I was keen to get it, pushing myself forward, telling him I wanted the job.

Before he took me on he said he just wanted to see if I could ride well enough to handle a mad horse and cut a bullock from a mob. He had a sleepy looking old chestnut horse standing in the yards, eating from a nosebag. In the next yard was a mob of about a dozen mixed up steers and bullocks, ones that looked like reject scraggs from different mobs, some with big wicked horns, some with scraggy coats and half wild eyes. Standing in their midst was a smallish roan steer. He was half the size of the bigger bullocks, with little spiky horns.

"OK sonny boy, let's see how good you can ride," he chuckled. He tossed me a bridle, no saddle in sight. "Jump on the old chestnut warhorse there. Go cut that roan steer next door out of the mob."

The chestnut looked dead quiet, it barely lifted its head as I came up, unclipped the nose bag and put on a bridle. It showed no more interest as I walked around it

sizing it up and running a hand over its withers and rump. It was battle scarred, with long healed cuts and lumps scattered through the hair. I thought it must have had a hard life. It showed no interest as I felt it over, checking it out.

OK here goes nothing, I thought, doubting I could get this old nag to raise a trot as I cut into the mob in the next yard. I followed the way JJ had taught me to get on a bareback horse, a quick flick of the leg over the side and I was sitting in the middle of its broad back. At least I was for the first half second after I touched down. The next half second this sleepy creature exploded. A bare second later I was back on the ground, sitting on my but in a patch of horse dung.

Fred roared laughing. "That set you back a step, heh! And I thought you could ride?" he called out.

I dusted myself off though I could not wipe the green dung stain from the back of my pants. *Time to not let this horse think I am easy meat.*

This time I led the horse into the middle of the yard. I tied up a front leg, the way JJ had shown me, before I tried to mount again. I would show this horse I knew a thing or two. This time it stood there after I settled on its back.

I reached down and released the strap which held its leg up. The horse took its time, putting all four feet squarely on the ground and bunching up its muscles before it made the next move. This time I was ready, centred and balanced. For the best part of a minute we twisted and turned, at times it was bucking, other times rearing and kicking out, sometimes running full tilt at the rails and doing a last minute swerve or stop to try and throw me off.

I concentrated hard on just sitting there, ignoring the small crowd who had gathered and were cheering one or both of us on. At last there came a time when it was done. The horse stopped moving and I relaxed. It seemed to be saying, "Well I have given it my best shot but you are still there so I suppose we had better get down to business.

It walked in a measured way over to the gate through to the pen where the bullocks waited. I jumped down and opened the gate and then jumped onto its back again. It was as steady as a rock. Now it was my ally, in the yard of the bullocks the big horns were swinging, casting out for me to try and spear me. But this horse was battle hardened, it had seen it all before as all the scars on its back and sides bore witness. It bit and kicked the unruly bullocks until they were driven into a corner and standing alone was the roan steer, wondering where its mates had gone.

I barely moved a muscle as the wily old horse drafted this steer apart from the rest. When the roan steer was next to the gate and the bullocks were in the furthest corner it let out a whinny as if to say, "Okay I have done the job, now let us out of here."

With that Fred swung the gate open and we trotted out, side by side, boy on horse and baby bullock. There was a cheer from the onlookers. "You show em, MB, well done to old Pocket Rocket."

So I was signed on with Fred declaring, "Well if MB has ridden Rocket bareback he must be able to ride a bit."

Rocket, or 'Pocket Rocket' as he was affectionately called, was his champion rodeo saddle-bronc horse who very few rough riders had ridden to time, even after many years on the job.

With me, once he had done his bucking show we became the best of mates. He never gave me another worry despite still putting many others in the dirt. It was one of Fred's favourite tricks to test out the new lads on him. He looked as docile as a dairy cow, but then appearances can deceive.

The next day Fred brought me to his small farm out the back of Townsville. With us, as well as Rocket, he brought the pen of steers and bullocks that I had braved. They were the new recruits for his rodeo circuit, sourced for bad manners, big horns and generally scruffy mean looks.

His farm here was his depot for holding rodeo stock he bought from other stations across Queensland added to by ones he brought in from his big spread out towards Cloncurry, . We settled into a comfortable routine. He was an old rodeo rider who, when age and injury started to slow him down, kept his love for the sport alive by sourcing the rodeo stock and renting them and his services out. His outfit was second to none in fearsome reputation.

In March each year he assembled his stock for the next six months on the road, made sure they were all fit, healthy and sufficiently bad tempered. Then in early April his season started and he would load them onto transport trucks and work his way around the country on a weekly booking schedule, arriving in each town mid-week before its annual rodeo. He had a team of half a dozen who helped him on a contract basis and who came and went between different events. I was the only one who stayed all the way.

Over the first couple months we each largely kept to ourselves but then, as trust was built, we started to talk. He had had a hard life, not too dissimilar to my own. There had been a succession of women, none of whom had stuck. He willingly admitted he was a 'ornery old bastard'. As far as he knew he had never had kids of his own and now well into his fifties he was moving into just liking his own company and the odd drink with his mates.

Truth be told I think he loved his animals much more than people. A part of me felt the same and this understanding meant it worked between us. So, slowly, over many nights of OP rums we became friends, two loners who could each survive on our own, one a teenager and the other a veteran of many encounters. Yet our friendship was real and as the months rolled by I felt as if I belonged here, off-siding to him, whether on the wide empty plains of the 'Curry' or in the tight confines of a rodeo chute.

In between jobs he coached me on my riding skills, over the long winter months teaching me many of the tricks he knew, how to calm a mad horse or bull just a touch so it could be ridden and the rider make time, how to turn an otherwise docile creature into a fire breathing monster, how to get in and out of dangerous places unscathed, use of timing, speed and agility to find a gap and go through it in a split second. He told me I was a natural, one of the few like him who were born with the gift of reading these things, one who could read which way a horse or bull would move before it knew itself. His hero was none other than mine, the Breaker of 100 years ago. He had read all he could find on the man and his bookshelf had them all and little else besides.

And when we were not working the stock he taught me other tricks as well. He liked to shoot and had a selection of priceless weapons, top of the range items. He took pleasure in teaching me the characteristics of each, the balance, recoil,

adjusting for the wind and estimating range. I did not have his skill but, as the months passed, I got ever closer.

And he taught me how to fight with my hands, both fair and foul. In his early years he had done some touring with the boxing troupes, fighting for purses in the country towns. He was rarely beaten and still had his trophies to prove it. So he could fight pretty like the pro-boxers but he could also fight dirty like the pub scrappers. He taught me both sets of tricks. I was good at this too. Again, I was not quite his equal in cunning but I had youth and agility to compensate. If nothing else early beatings my father and others gave me taught me to take punishment and wait until that right chance came. Then to get in and out with a finishing hit before the other knew what happened.

So I grew in skill and strength and perfected the mental toughness to take any pain and the killer instinct to take my chance when it came. Fred never minded when I connected and hurt him, but he would do his best to return it with added interest. He mostly succeeded.

A year passed. It felt as if this rodeo contracting outfit was the home I had never had. I gave trust to Fred to look after me. He trusted me to look after his stock and mind his back. From April to October we did the rodeo circuit across the outback, Mount Isa, Borroloola, Alice Springs, Carrieton were but a few of the names. As we travelled Fred taught me ever more of his rodeo tricks learned from forty years on the road, and alongside him my skills and understanding of how to put on a good performance grew.

It was part showmanship, part strength, part skill; but the combination was wonderful to behold as man and beast competed for dominance in the space between the sky and ground.

Fred would not let me ride his best buckjumpers, he told that I was too bloody good and those who mastered them took away their desire to win. He wanted them to give no quarter to any rider lest it spoiled the show for the rest. He would let me ride poddy steers, mad bullocks and just sometimes a new bull, so as to keep my wits sharp and my balance firm. And I could take my pick of his cutting horses and barrel racers, superb creatures of speed and balance which were an absolute joy to ride and race.

I was now fifteen with arms and shoulders toughened by the work, able to easily lift a steel yard panel onto a truck unaided, or toss full feedbags as if they were full of feathers. I was not yet as strong or hard as Fred but I was catching up fast.

One day we were working stock through the yards at his home station out near the Curry, sorting through the young bulls to pull out those with the biggest spiky horns and the maddest, meanest manners to go into this year's circuit. I was off in the stock camp brewing the billy for smoko, while Fred put the last of the new crop of bulls away.

Suddenly there was a crash of steel and bone, and bellowing of a bull.

I vaulted the rails and rushed in to assist, unsure what was going on.

Two bulls were fighting. One had its horn into the side of the other and was smashing it into the fence. Fred was trying to separate them as they charged at one another before one was killed. The one that was losing was driven toward the gate behind which Fred was standing. He whipped the gate open to let the victim bull through and in an instant slammed it closed in the pursuing bulls face.

But he broke his own cardinal rule, which he had told me many times, 'never take your eyes off the one behind'.

As he was slamming the bolt home to block the pursuer the bull behind him whipped around and drove his big spiky horn through the middle of Fred's back. I was too far away to intervene and watched with horror as Fred's body impaled on a horn was flung around like a dead rat in the mouth of terrier, smashed against the steel in this place and that. Fred did not cry out or move, it seemed he was past all pain.

I saw a steel bar resting in the corner, a pole of steel used as an extra lever on the head bale when more force was required. I picked it up and ran at the bull as it continued to smash into Fred, bringing down the bar with all the force I could muster where the bull's neck met its skull. It dropped poleaxed, dead with one blow.

But it was too late for Fred, I knew at a glance he was dead too. I picked up his smashed and broken body and carried it back to the house where I laid him on the couch. This man was my friend, with him I had belonged, and now he was gone.

Chapter 10

Crocodile Connection.

I stayed at Fred's property until the last of what he owned was sold, first for one month and then another. It was surprising how quickly the vultures from his distant family gathered to lay claim to what was his, even though he had not seen them in more than a decade of life. But they were not to be denied and I, a fifteen year old, had no say. I kept the animals fed and watered until all were sold and gone, and by then his stations were sold too.

While he had lived he paid me my wages in cash each week, taking nothing out for rent and expenses. So I had a good stash of cash to live on from here. On the day the last beast was sold I took a ride with the truck driver into town, knowing I would come back no more.

I came back to the coast at Townsville and drifted south. I had no fixed purpose but the weatherman said it was raining further up north in Cairns. I wanted sunshine so I went south instead. I came to a place named Yeppoon, a coastal town from which boats to the Keppel Islands, the southern end of the Barrier Reef, ran.

I went out and for a few days camped on the beach. I learned how to dive among the corral reefs that fringed it. Below the water was a magical world, a place of colour and beauty where I felt at peace. It helped me forget the hole inside from where Fred used to be, we had lived so much in each other's pockets for the last year that it was hard to believe it was over. At times I expected to look around and see his mischievous eyes and mad grin. But of course he was never there.

Then, deciding I should conserve my funds, I went looking for a job. In the town I saw a notice seeking workers to assist on the local crocodile farm a few miles south. So I made my way there.

The people who owned it were good people but they were mostly busy guiding and entertaining the tourists. So the care of the farm and its animals was left to myself and a couple other workers. I was given the job of cleaning out the enclosures, and keeping the gardens in order. There was something about these huge silent predators which I found utterly fascinating. There was a hatchery where the eggs were taken to hatch, a series of small shallow pools for the little crocodiles, ranging from new hatchlings a few inches long up to animals a metre long which were soon destined for meat and leather. Then there were about twenty breeding ponds, each with a breeding pair of a female of two to three metres and a male a bit larger.

Last, and most interesting to me, was the monster crocodile pond, where the big wild caught crocs went, animals that had been captured as they were causing danger to people up and down the coast. There were ten supersized crocs in this pool, each upwards of four metres long. The largest was well past five metres long and weighed as much as a car. Surprisingly, for such large creatures, they ate relatively little, an old broiler chook each week was the staple diet for something that weighed upwards of half a ton, though they would happily take much larger things and the biggest would easily take a full sized bullock though it would take several sittings to get through it. Things around the size of people, dogs and unsuspecting waterbirds which occasionally landed on the pond were clearly viewed by these huge lizards as preferred food items.

What I liked best was to observe these animals when no one else was around. I would sit quietly for an hour or two as one worked its way up the bank, lay in the sun until warm and then slowly and silently slid into the water with barely a ripple. And just sometimes they exploded; a swirl, flurry and blur of movement. Sometimes it was to try and catch a waterbird that landed on the water, sometimes it was due to a sudden noise, there were other times when I could see no reason at all. But what amazed me was how something so still and silent could move so fast.

The biggest of all the crocodiles, named 'Half Blind Harry' because he had only one eye, was around five and a half metres, seventeen to eighteen feet in old measure. He was said to weigh over a ton though this was a guess, as no one had caught him to weigh it in more than a decade since brought here. People said Harry had got a foot longer since then. And, of course, even the length was a guess because we never got a tape measure out. Still, one could get close to knowing its length by marking the place where the tip of its snout was and where its tail ended and measuring that distance when it was safely in the water. One day I measured this as 5.7 metres, or eighteen and a half feet.

It was not safe to go close to the edge of the pond and we were warned to be careful. But we still had to go in the enclosure to clean out food scraps and other rubbish to stop it getting dirty looking or smelly. At these times one of us would work and another would stand guard alongside with a big rake or sharp pole that could be used to fend any unwanted crocodile attention away. We also kept a couple spare chooks on hand as putting one of these near a crocodile's mouth

usually caught its attention. We had the routine for cleaning this enclosure pretty well worked out. It was kind of exciting because you were always on your toes for the unexpected.

Mostly the job was given to us two youngest blokes, Davie and me. On days when Davie was not working the older guy Evan would do it with me. He always made me do the cleaning bits while he stood guard. He had made his own special pole with a wicked sharp tip. That would have been OK if he just used it to protect me. But he was a cruel one, he loved to jab this stick into the soft skin where the crocodile's legs joined the belly. Mostly they ran off when stabbed, but a couple of the really big mean ones would try and whip around to grab the offending pole when it stabbed them. That was fine for the one with the pole; it kept a good ten feet of distance between the pole holder and the crocodile. But I was usually in front of the pole holder and I would find a large and very angry crocodile whipping around towards me. Evan used to think this was a bit of a joke, me having to suddenly jump back to get away from the maddened animal. At first I let it pass hoping that Evan would get bored with his silly trick after a while.

Of course Evan never did this when there was anyone else around. If the tourists saw it and told the boss he would be in big trouble and the owners were not cruel people so they would have chewed him out if they saw him doing something cruel like this.

Davie and I tried not to disturb the big crocs, when it was just the two of us we could get amazingly close without disturbing them and the odd time one came our way a chook thrown in front of it worked to stop it.

Unfortunately, after I had been working there a bit over a month, Davie had two weeks off. So I was stuck with Evan this whole time. It was a time when Half Blind Harry had taken to sunning himself on a bank not far from the entrance gate each morning before the park opened. There was usually muck and other stuff lying in the part as it was close to where the visitors walked and, despite warnings of not throwing anything in, lots of people could not help themselves and did it anyway.

Harry would lie there with his good eye facing the water and his blind eye away and closest to us. So Evan got it into his mind that it was a bit of fun to jab Harry in the place where his eye used to be before. The first couple times it gave Harry a nasty start and he scuttled away into the water.

But, even though people say crocodiles are dumb animals, there must have been a plan forming in Harry's brain. And Evan was getting cocky after the two days when it seemed his stick had scared Harry away. This next day Harry was further up the pool, away from the gate. We could have just left him there; there was no need to get close to that place.

But, while I worked away cleaning up the usual area, Evan decided to sneak up on Harry on his blind side. I think he thought that Harry would not know what he was doing, but of course Harry had decades of practice in following things by sound and movement and ambushing them. So Harry kept dead still, as if asleep, while Evan crept closer.

I watched with a sense that something bad was going to happen, a sort of sixth sense. Part of me thought I should warn Evan. But he was like the others I had got rid of, a nasty, vicious piece of work who liked tormenting others weaker or dumber than himself. Today I felt certain he had picked the wrong target.

As the pole stabbed in there was a blur of movement. A swivelling head, with a mouth of teeth came snapping down on the pole and breaking off the end part way towards Evan. At the same time the crocodile's head smashing into the pole made it act like a spear, punching it back at Evan and knocking him off his feet. In an instant he was lying on his side with a big super-angry crocodile still coming towards him.

I was maybe ten metres away. I watched it unfold in slow motion. This huge lizard kept on coming, half spitting and shaking the stick from its mouth as it came. In the instant I saw the crocodile spin and Evan go flying I knew, if I ran forward flat out, I could probably distract the crocodile, and give Evan a chance to get away. Instead I thought. *I will leave him to it, let him get what's coming to him.*

In the last second before it reached him, I saw terror and pleading in his eyes, as if to say, "Please help me."

I looked back at him and showed nothing, thinking it served him right.

He scrabbled furiously trying to crawl away on his knees, or maybe regain his feet. But it was far too late. There was a cracking and crunching noise. Teeth snapped shut on a head and half a chest.

Now I thought I should call for help. Not to save him, but rather to give an appearance of trying. So I shouted out, "Help, Croc Attack!"

Others came running, just in time to see Half Blind Harry carrying its prize away and sliding into the water. Perhaps I should have felt remorse. Instead I felt comradeship with the crocodile; like me, in the face of a cruel bully, it had got its own back.

It was strange how it unfolded from here. The police were called and half an hour later a local constable arrived. Of Evan, of course, there was no sign. Wherever Harry had taken him, whether in his belly or buried underwater below in some part of the pool, it was not a place to instantly go exploring with ten large crocodiles for company. Thanks to the two other staff, who had rushed up when I called and had also seen Harry, with Evan in his mouth, slide into the water, there was no uncertainty about what happened.

So Constable O'Connor secured the site by closing the park and asking me and the two other witnesses to wait until he could take our statements, then he called for backup. I was asked to wait in the café and sitting there I was a focus of many questions from the two girls who worked there.

I told them what happened, with my role being that I was cleaning up down near the gate and too far away to do anything. I did let it slip that Evan had been tormenting the crocodile for the last two days and perhaps this was what caused it to attack him.

Then two other policemen came and interviewed me and I gave them the same story. When they asked what Evan was doing so far away from where I was working when his job was to guard me, I said I did not know, except he seemed to enjoy trying to torment this one eyed crocodile by sneaking up on its blind side and poking it with a stick and this time it had backfired. I did not smile or show my true feelings but it was hard to act as if I was really sorry.

Perhaps it was because I was so unmoved by what had happened that made them suspicious, the other two witnesses were pretty shook up. But it seemed they only half believed me. Of course they wanted to see some proof of my identity

but I had none. Mark Brown is such a common name I knew it would be hard to trace.

Eventually, after going over what happened several times they left me alone and set to planning what should be done to recover the body. In the end they decided that, as Harry often sunned himself on the bank in the afternoon they would wait and see if he came onshore and then shoot him and see if Evan was inside. It was clear they were unwilling to get close to the water after what happened. I was told to stay at the café in case they had more questions. The owner, Rod, accompanied the police in checking out the rest of the place.

I was eating my lunch, a steak sandwich, when a loud boom rang out. A minute later the word was out, they had shot Half Blind Harry. As predicted he had come back to sun himself in the early afternoon in his regular spot, with his head a bare five metres from the gate. So a policeman with a high powered rifle had put a single bullet in his brain. Now they had hitched him up to a rope connected to a police four wheel drive and were dragging him through the gate. In due course his body was loaded onto a trailer with a winch and taken away.

By this time everyone was gathered around watching, myself included. Looking at Harry I was pretty sure Evan was inside, his belly definitely looked bigger than before, he probably thought it would be good to lie in the sun and digest his unexpected bonus meal. Harry going was off to the morgue in Rockhampton, an hour's drive away, to be sliced open to see if he had a body inside. As there was nothing more for the police to do here I was instructed to finish my day's work and return the next day when the police would want to question me again.

That afternoon, when I got back to the caravan park where I had been staying, the decision was obvious. I had no identity papers and the police would not easily let it drop until they found out who I was. So, unless I felt like being the subject of their attention for days to come, I was best to be very far away when they came looking for me tomorrow. It meant going without my last week's pay but I still had plenty of cash from working for Fred from the last year.

That night a Greyhound bus took me to Townsville and next day another brought me across to Mount Isa, a place I knew from the rodeo circuit last year. My idea was to look for work at a station out this way; I had met many of the local station owners when working for Fred in Cloncurry. So I hung around in the Isa for three or four days while casting around for work offers.

I was having a quiet drink, just lemonade, in a Mont Isa pub where locals came at end of the day, expecting to meet a ringer or two, when a mob of different looking types rocked in, a bit like the African safari suited types. Outside they had five flash-looking four wheel drives, roof racks covered in gear, as well as the backs of vehicles, all with trailers well loaded.

I found myself sitting next to an older guy who the others called 'Prof'.

In the polite way of outback pubs he greeted his fellow drinkers. When he shook my hand I asked, "What does 'Prof' stand for?"

He laughed and said, "Professor Richard Hayden at your service, I am a Professor of Archaeology at Brisbane University."

So we fell to talking. He told me he was heading up north to a place called Riversleigh, a place of famous fossil discoveries from the time when Australia was inhabited by lots of giant animals, a huge crocodile and giant marsupials amongst

others. He and a team of other experts were excavating some of the most significant fossil discoveries ever made in Australia. His expertise was the early human occupation and others were expert on the various animals from this time when the interior of Australia, a now barren landscape, was lush rainforest. He was full of passion and enthusiasm for his field and as he told about his discoveries.

As he spoke he brought it all to life in my imagination. I could picture it all so clearly, this place where we were living now but instead full of early dark skinned people living alongside amazing animals. I asked him when they were going there, how far it was and whether they needed any help.

He replied, "We are staying in Mount Isa for the rest of today and for tomorrow. We need to double check all our gear and supplies as it is a long way back from there if we need to get anything we have left behind.

"As to how far, not so far as the crow flies, direct it is only about 300 kilometres from here. But it is a slow rough four wheel drive. We need to go slowly so as not to damage our gear and it will take a full day to drive there.

"As for help, we have a full crew but there are always more jobs than there are people to do them. The problem is having money to pay for extras, like all research it runs on a tight budget. So while I would love to have a few more hands I really have no spare money left over to pay them."

I did not care about the money; this was something I really wanted to do, to see rocks come out of the ground with bits of long dead animals preserved in them, that idea blew my mind.

I said, "I am here to get a job on a station, last year I worked on one near Cloncurry. But I do not need the money at the moment. I still have most of my pay from last year. So, if you need an extra pair of hands I would be happy to do it for free, just some food and a place to sleep is enough for me."

In a minute I was unofficially signed on, no paper, just a handshake agreement. The professor was not a big one for form filling paperwork, he put his writing time into writing books, he said. At this juncture he handed over his latest one to me for light reading, a description of the finds from the last five years. Dense though it was I devoured it, beginning that night and many subsequent nights. Around the campfire at Riversleigh I would quiz him and ask him to tell me about each of the discoveries he had written about.

The one that I remember best was the discovery of a giant crocodile, which he called the Cleaver Headed Baru. It was massive, at least five metres long. It must have been huge to see in the flesh, like Half Blind Harry if not bigger. I asked him about the word 'Baru'. He said that was genus name for this group of crocodiles but was also the word the aboriginal people in East Arnhem Land used for the large saltwater crocodiles. This one was similar in size to any of the biggest 'salties' he had seen though it had lived in the fresh water swamps of this place a few million years ago.

I rolled the name 'Baru' around on my lips, there seemed to something almost mystical about this word, it conjured up creatures of another time, an era like the time people called the aboriginal dreamtime. I decided then that when I left here I should travel to the place of the Baru and see a real one in the wild. So far the

only ones I had seen were on a crocodile farm. It seemed to much diminish their power to be kept in a cage and poked at by strangers.

I stayed there and worked alongside the Prof as a personal assistant for three months until the year's excavation was done. Along the way I started to understand this part of the history of our land. When time came for him to leave he said he thought he could find a job back in Brisbane for me in his University faculty, may even get me into a course to study these animals.

I thanked him, saying, "Maybe one day, for now there is too much of this country I want to see."

I promised him I would try and come back next year and help him again.

I knew where I was going; I was heading for the country of the Baru, my unknown destiny.

Chapter 11

My Crocodile Skin.

A month had passed from when I left Riversleigh until I came to Gove. At first I had headed north until I came to a place called Hells Gates where the local aborigines had told first explorer, Leichardt, that they would not come any further with him as, after here, there were another mob of blackfellows too dangerous to cross through their country. So Leichardt went on alone.

Here I met, in a real way, my own first proper aborigines. I don't mean the ones you meet on stations who do stockwork or the ones that hang around the towns looking for grog, tobacco or hand-me downs. I mean the ones who support themselves off their land; hunting, fishing digging for yams and collecting other plant food. There were two older ladies, surrounded by a pile of kids, who sat on the ground under a shady tree at Hells Gates.

Having no particular need to be anywhere and feeling well-heeled with the two hundred dollars the Prof had given me as a bonus, I thought I would see if there was anything they needed. After all such a big pile of kids was bound to be hungry. I remembered with gratitude the odd kind people when I was a child in Melbourne who had given me food and other gifts. I could still remember these things with fondness, like the taste of an ice-cream that one had bought me out of kindness. So now I had more than enough money for what I needed I thought, maybe, I could give a bit of kindness to others and I liked the look of this mob. It was clear from their clothes and other minimal possessions that they owned little. But it was also clear that they were happy with their lot and at that time they were sharing a couple of lollipops that were passed from mouth to mouth so everyone got a lick and a taste.

So I started by offering to buy another lollipop for anyone who wanted their own. The senior lady, Ruth was her name, smiled at me and said, "More better I want ice cream, Chocolate Heart ice cream."

I nodded and asked, "Who else wants ice cream?" Every hand went up, twelve of them. So I went off to the shop to see how much twelve ice creams would cost, plus an extra one for me. Ruthie came with me and chose some other things as well, a loaf of bread, some flour, sugar, tea, milk and a couple tins of bully beef. It made a big hole in one of my two lots of one hundred dollars. But I paid with a smile and came and sat in the circle under the tree while we all ate our ice creams. Then Ruthie made bully beef sandwiches for all of us including me and her friend lit a fire and boiled the billy.

As we big people sipped tea the children ran off to play. Ruthie said to me, "What you rich whitefella up to, all that money? Where you going now?"

I pointed to where I thought north was and said. "Long way up there, to that Arnhem Land country, place with lot of big crocodiles. You know, where they have that crocodile ancestor, Baru name."

She shook her head as if to say 'Bad Idea', then said, "That bad sickness country, not safe, better you stay here. I teach you how to hunt goanna and catch flying fox and goose with throwing stick."

Ruth and Peggy said they were minding the children while all the other adults had gone off to a meeting with the whitefellas in Doomadgee, a couple hours drive away. It was something about them getting title to some land in Queensland. The rest of their land was back in the Northern Territory, what they sometimes called Nicholson Block and mostly called Waanyi. This was where they were returning this afternoon.

I sat there and talked to them while the children played their own games and the hours passed. It seemed that time was an unimportant commodity to these ladies; they had fed their charges lunch and would find something for their dinner if needed. In the meantime they were quite content to sit in the shade of a big leafy tree, to wait while others rushed around and to let the world come to them.

When I asked how long the rest of their people at Doomadgee would be? Ruth replied, "Maybe come tonight, maybe tomorrow."

It was near dark when two beaten up looking Toyota tray-back utilities arrived with eleven people on board, some in the front and more in the back. Ruth, Peggy and the children climbed on board as I watched. When they were loaded Ruth called out to me, "Place here for you Mark, longa side me. You come with me like I said and I teach you our ways.

So I went and, for almost two weeks, I lived with them in camp on the Nicholson River in a place where a huge cliff line we call the China Wall ran to the north. As promised she taught me things about her land, the things which were good to eat and the names of many other things. She sent me out with the men to learn how to hunt. She was the elder of the tribe and what she said went. It was like she had decided to adopt me and make me yet another of her many children and grandchildren.

At last, after almost two weeks, a group were driving up to Borroloola for some tribal ceremony business with the local groups for the Macarthur River. I went along. Ruth came too and, as we reached Borroloola, she said, with a glint of a tear in her eye, "Well den Mark, I bin teach you our ways. Now you must go up to dat other place, Baru place and meet your ancestor spirit.

“But you be careful, real careful. Dat powerful spirit. Maybe a little bit of bad from spirit get into you. You need to watch out, you be real careful it not make you do bad tings. Dat Baru very powerful spirit already belong you.”

So I travelled on via Roper River. The community there had sent people to the tribal meeting at Borroloola, and they brought me back to their own country. They, in their turn, passed me through their land, through meeting places and connections, sitting on the backs of Toyota and in little boats until I reached a place called Groot Eylandt where they was a mine for a heavy rock called Manganese.

I worked in the town for a couple weeks, a place called Alyangula until a boat came that went on to Nhulunbuy, another town with a mine for bauxite in the country of the Baru people. After the friendship of the people up to the Roper the Groote Eylandt people were a bit strange, not quite unfriendly but they kept more separate and it was the same at Gove.

It seemed these mining towns were big places with lots of white people who kept themselves apart. These dark skinned people just delivered me to each place and left me to my own devices.

So I slid back into white society and, as my clothes were getting shabby, I spent some of my diminishing stash of dollars buying a new outfit of white fella clothes in the local store. That way I could blend back in and look like I belonged here.

In Gove I did not know the aboriginal people and they kept off away to themselves. I soon found a job in the mine, just a low level job helping with cleaning and keeping the place tidy in return for which I got what seemed an outrageously good wage along with a place to stay, a small air-conditioned room in a demountable and three meals a day in the local mess. It was an abundance of things even though the company was poorer.

The single adult white men mostly drank after work though a few went fishing and drive their shiny cars around the town. However they paid little mind to me, the youngest and lowest in their social order. Even though my body had grown and was not much smaller than theirs, and I was lean and tough, to them I was just ‘Kid’ or sometimes ‘Hey Mark’, called out to me at times when they wanted something, but otherwise ignored.

The funny thing was that, even though I did not seek out the aboriginal people of the town, having taken for my own Ruthie’s maxim of letting things happen in their own good time, these people came to me. It began with two dark skinned boys around my age who had a similar job to me. They had tribal names but also English ones, Timothy for the older and Moses for the younger, closest to my age. They spoke a language that I did not understand, Yolgnu I later learned, but with a smattering of English.

We were given a table off at the side of the mess to eat our lunch. Over these meals a conversation of sorts started. They asked me what place I came from and for some reason I just told them the truth, more or less. I said that I came from Melbourne, that my father was a bad man who hurt people and my mother was dead. So I had gone off looking for work and first worked on cattle and sheep stations riding horses and now had come up here. All this seemed of immense fascination to them, it was all so foreign to all they knew and therefore it seemed exciting. They in turn told me about their land and people, their relatives, their

love of fishing and hunting, the girls in the tribe they found beautiful, the people to watch out for. Along the way they taught me some of their words and customs.

One weekend, when there was no work, they came knocking at my bunk room door saying, "You come fishing with us?" They had a beaten up old car that an uncle had leant them.

We drove out to a point where the rocks poked far out into the ocean.

I thought they meant to catch fish with lines and had brought fishing lines with them. But what they meant was to spear the fish which swam below in the crystal clear water, fish with brilliant patterns of silver, red, green and blue. They were only interested in the big ones, letting the small to mid-sized ones swim past undisturbed. It was the ones the length of my arm or longer they wanted, big enough to feed a lot of people at once as I later came to understand.

They had tied thin black twine to the end of each spear. Each stood like a rock, totally immobile as many fish swam past. I sat still in the centre of the rocks, a little higher, where I could see both sides. After a long still time of nothing Timothy's body tensed. A second later there was a blur and another second later he was hauling the spear back by its cord. Attached to it was a glistening fish, a parrot fish with yellow and blue colours added to the silver and a beak like mouth. It weighed perhaps six or seven kilos and looked magnificent as it wriggled away the last of its life with a huge barb running through it.

A few minutes later I could see Moses get ready but his spear went wide and was pulled back empty. Timothy grinned mockingly at him. A few more minutes passed and then his spear shot out again and this time he pulled out an even bigger fish with red glistening scales, a red emperor I later learned.

They were both well pleased with their success and set to teach me the basic skills. It was much harder than it looked and timing was everything. One also had to adjust for the fish's movement and account for the curve of light in the water which changed the aim point. But I practised trying to hit where a rock was to get this right. When I had this worked out I started to target real fish. Ten unsuccessful thrusts later I started to think it was impossible, a skill you had to learn as a child. But I remembered advice that Fred had given me when shooting running rabbits, "Don't overthink it, just back your judgement and let your action follow your eye so, as your eye sees the line you fire. So I tried this and stopped trying to decide the right time. Instead I let my spearing arm follow my eye and when my eye saw it was in line my arm let the spear fly. And it worked.

Though, not on the grand size scale of my friends, within a few more minutes I caught two good sized eating fish, a kilo or two each. We all cheered and backslapped at the first and after the second Moses said to Timothy, "Not bad for a balanda, or whitey!"

That night I joined the extended family for a feast centred around these fish, with damper and root vegetables of unknown names but good flavour thrown in. Then, to finish off, pieces of sugar bag, the comb dripping with dark honey from a native bee nest. It was strange how much I felt I belonged.

As the weeks went by it was almost as if I was adopted into the tribe. As I passed them in the street people would call me by a skin name they all knew when they saw me. Timothy and Moses were opposite skin groups to each other, even though distant cousins. As I was closest in age to Moses I was declared to be his

brother and given his skin name, meaning his father was my father and his mother was my mother within the tribe.

I had come to this place in the build-up months when the huge storms formed up over the ocean and swept in in the late afternoon, dousing us all with in torrents of water. In an hour or two the rain would be gone with only puddles steaming in the late afternoon sun still in evidence. After Christmas the monsoon came, bands of streaming cloud and blowing rain sweeping in from the north-west. It alternated between light and heavy showers but it went on for days with no sun in sight. Moisture seeped into everything until damp pervaded all with mould growing on walls.

On rainy days we would sit in shelter and play cards or tell stories. As we did gradually the stories of the crocodile ancestor emerged. He was a huge ancient being and all the crocodiles of today were all his children. There were medicine men who had special duties in serving Baru that the rest of us were not allowed to know. For the rest of us Baru was a sacred creature, ferocious predator but also ancestral being, to whom we must give respect. As one of the group I was imbued with the same fascination as the others when the wondrous stories of this distant creation spirit were told.

As the rain eased again, back to storms, a ceremony was announced, an initiation ceremony. Timothy and Moses, along with the other almost adult boys, would become fully fledged members of the tribe.

The night of the ceremony came around soon. I was not sure whether I should go or whether it was a private thing only for those with dark skins. However on the hot afternoon before I was due to begin, I was asked to come to the camp by Moses.

I went with him to find an old medicine man sitting by the fire, his body painted with amazing shapes and colours, with crocodile images dominant.

He waived to me to sit down and I sat in the dirt alongside him. He drew a pattern with a stick in the grey ash of the fire. It was a crocodile shape.

He turned and said to me. "We, the old people have been talking to this ancestor spirit. It tells us you are one of us, one of the crocodile children.

"So tonight, before we have the initiation for new men into our tribe, we ask you to become one of us, to take on the skin of the crocodile, to belong to our totem. Then you can watch the ceremony of your friends tonight as one of us, one of the Baru totem.

He held out a small carved object in his hand. It was a crocodile creature, carved and painted out of dense hard timber, scales and lines marked. I took it and felt a power in it, the ancient dreamtime Baru spirit.

I told him what I felt and he nodded.

That night, just after the sun was fully set, at the time of crocodile feeding, they painted my body in crocodile patterns and named me one of them, according to their law. To help me remember and know my obligations they gave me the small carved crocodile as mine to keep.

So now I was one of them, a member of the crocodile clan and was glad.

As one with the others I watched the boys of the tribe become men. I hoped in time I could be fully initiated into the tribe like they were. But tonight was not my night, it belonged to them.

Chapter 12

First Love.

With my admission into the crocodile clan I was given further instruction in the obligations of a clan member which I soaked up. This sense of belonging for a child without a real identity was incredibly important to me. So, even though I continued to have my bunk bed in in the white town camp, I was more and more a part of the other dark skinned community.

I started to notice and get to know better other members of this other community. One such was a girl around my age, her aboriginal name meant butterfly and her English name was Betsy. She gave me shy smiles when our eyes connected and I was aware of how lovely she looked, skin the colour of bush honey with a dash of gold mixed through. I gathered she was promised to an older man who already had several wives, but she seemed in no rush to let this happen. Sometimes we would talk in short bits of a mixture of broken English and her Yolgnu words, but it was only a sentence or two. We were both shy and it felt like a block to more than that limited contact.

One day after work I was walking along the beach, part way between the white town and the aboriginal community. It was at least a couple miles from either place and no one else was in sight.

There was a slight curve in the beach around a tree lined headland. As I came around there was Betsy walking towards me, all alone, no sign of the customary gaggle of other young almost adult girls who normally went with her. She gave a slight start and then a spontaneous smile and walked towards me, with something akin to a mischievous grin. I fell into step beside her and we walked along making awkward conversation.

Then, in an unexpected manner she darted sideways into knee deep water, scooping up handfuls which she flung at me laughing. I ran towards her splashing water back and she redoubled her effort. Soon we were both drenched. As I looked at her delicate womanly body, outlined against the thin material of her dress I was smitten. She was amazingly beautiful, her slender thighs lit up in a silhouette, meeting in a dark place where no light came through, perfect rounded breasts pointing into nipples which were clearly visible though the filmy fabric.

I could not take my eyes off her and she was clearly aware of my looking, giving a sly grin as the effect she was having which was evident in my bulging shorts. Then giggling she ran in and tickled me around the waist and under the arms, I responded in kind grabbing onto her waist and hips from behind as she ducked away.

She squealed and wiggled. Now my hands were around her chest feeling firm breasts and swollen nipples under my fingers. Her struggling ceased. She pushed back against me, pushing her round buttocks against my throbbing part. Our hands were all over each other and before we knew it clothes were pulled away

and we were lying naked on the beach. She was the experienced one and spread herself open for me and guided me within her. It was wild, ecstatic and breathless. My climax within her was something so unexpected I found myself groaning, "God, Oh God, Oh my God," as I emptied within her.

She wrapped her body around mine and made her own pleasure sounds as she moved against me. In five minutes it was over and we lay there, both a bit amazed and incredulous at how this incredible passion had come over us.

When it was done we both dressed hurriedly and returned on our own ways, fearful of being seen.

We met in the same place the next day and for a few days more, each time beginning with play that soon turned into an intense sexual encounter, growing more adventurous each time we met, stretching it over ever longer periods with more exploratory touching and playing morphing into repeated sex. I was totally besotted with this gorgeous woman, thinking of little else during my working day except the anticipation of meeting her and indulging in intense intimate activity with her in the evening light, naked together on the deserted beach.

I never looked beyond my evenings with her into the future. Outside of the sex our conversation was limited. I loved her with a passionate intensity but was shy in talking either about what we were doing or about any wider world for us together.

She in turn avoided any discussion of anything beyond these joyous moments. Perhaps she understood better than me how it could never be.

It was one day in the second week when Timothy came to me as work was ending for the day, interrupting my desire to be away. He put his hand on my arm saying, "Don't rush off my friend. Walk with me. I have something I must say to you." So we walked into the bush behind the mine and sat together on a big dead log surrounded by bush.

Timothy turned again to me saying. "Tonight she will not be there.

I looked puzzled, hoping I had not heard right.

He repeated, Betsy will not be there. "She and you have been seen. Only Moses, myself and one other know. It was the other who saw you. She told Moses and he told me. We do not want to tell the others or there would be big trouble for you both. We decided you must be told we know and that you must stop seeing each other."

I said, "Why, why must we stop?"

Timothy looked with me with pity and said, "Betsy is your sister. I know you do not see her that way but in her clan it is so, she is of the same skin group. It can never be that way between a brother and sister in our tribe. If it is found out she will be speared or beaten and you will speared or driven out of our tribe and not able live in this place anymore.

"Betsy is promised to a man in our tribe who is of the right skin. It is better that she goes with him and gets married to him. There will be trouble if you stay and keep looking at her the way you do. There will be even more trouble if it is found out you have been lying with her, as a man does with a woman. So I think it is better if you go away. That way no one but Moses, me and one other will know. None of us will tell your secret.

“We cannot force you to leave but we think you must do so. If you stay there is too much danger that something will be found out. Then it is likely to end badly for you and even worse for Betsy. For you people will say, while you share out totem and skin, you are not really of us, grown up in our law. So you could not really be expected to fully understand.

“But it is not so for Betsy. She is of our tribe, she was raised in its law. She knows what she is doing is against our law; it cannot be allowed and must not continue. So if it happens again and is found out it will be very bad for her, at the least a severe beating, maybe even she will be speared and sent away from our tribe.

I sat there on the log, feeling my whole world had been torn away. I was besotted with the beautiful Betsy and yet I could not have her or she me. I was not overly worried about myself but I could not bear the thought of her being beaten, speared or driven away from the place where she belonged, just to indulge in some intense pleasure.

It was no help to me to think it was not against my own first people’s law or custom, that she was not related to me under the rules of my own society. What mattered was the rules of the world in which she belonged and these rules forbade what we had done. I felt no guilt for our shared passion, but I knew what Timothy said was so.

Now her unwillingness to talk about us being together or look to a place beyond those shared moments began to make sense. She already knew that it was impossible, it was just a brief but intense love affair, destined to burn away in the hard light of day. Even the fact that it was only in the evenings in the mystical half-light that we could be joined made a strange kind of sense. That was the only place where we could have a shared world, and it was always going to be circumscribed to a short window in time and space, a brief handful of dusks.

While it left a pain through my guts to go away from this delightful being, my life had been a succession of leavings and I had grown something tough around my innermost self to protect me. So it would be just one more in a long line thus. At least this time I did it with my own sense of duty to what I had gained in this place. My crocodile totem and skin name was intensely important to me too, in being given it I had gained something of immense importance. This was now part of my soul and whole being. I could not lightly throw it away by breaking the rules that came with it.

Like Betsy I was bound by these rules which I had taken on, they were something I must hold to in both good times and bad. So reason and loyalty pushed me to accept its necessity. And yet the pain burnt through me, even if I knew it was something to be endured and with time it would ease.

Next day I packed my bags and gave my notice on the pretext that my mother in Adelaide had taken badly ill and I needed to get home to her. By lunch time I was on a plane to Darwin.

Chapter 13

Living in the Long Grass.

I had been to Darwin for a few days the year I did the rodeo circuit with Fred. I had not taken much notice then, busy as I was with the work of putting on a rodeo. However it had seemed like an OK town, bigger than most places I went to. New money was coming in for mining and oil exploration but it still had a laid back tropical atmosphere made up with a mixture of tourists and hard drinking locals.

By the time I came from Gove the wet season was a fading memory, just occasional thunderheads followed by brief storms which rained for a few minutes then passed into steaming nothingness. All around the town the spear grass grew tall and rank, drying seed heads rising to well above my head before shrivelling into a waist high matt of dead straw like stems.

Even though I had worked in Gove for several months I had saved little, feeling secure and increasingly spending my money on things I needed, new clothes, better camping gear, food for my aboriginal community friends. So, even though I had money from before, it was steadily getting eaten away as time went by.

I was now seventeen, my body had filled out and got strong and I could easily pass for someone a couple years older. And I had a confidence which belied my youth. I had survived well enough over nearly four years living on my own wits and resources.

On leaving the Gove aboriginal community where I had belonged I felt a bit lost, I had grown a real sense of identity there and felt that, rather than rushing into another job, I needed to take a bit of time out to discover some bigger purpose and build an identity of who I was.

My year in the rodeo world had given me skills to look after myself whether with fists, guns, or other means, so I did not fear danger or getting into trouble. But I did not want to drift aimlessly from job to job, each going nowhere. I remembered the Prof telling me he could find me a job at the University in Brisbane and perhaps a place in a course studying something like he did. I felt some interest in getting that sort of learning.

Even though I could read and write well enough and had got good marks at school, that part of my life had finished in early high school. I knew it was a huge jump from that to knowing enough to get into a University. Plus there was the small problem with not having anything to identify myself. It had not mattered thus far in the small communities where I lived, and when my body was that of a gangly teenager. If I introduced myself as Mark Brown with MB as a nickname, people just accepted that was who I was; no one asked me to prove it through a piece of paper.

But for things coming over the horizon, like getting a driver's license or buying a car, two things I sensed I needed, I would need to have something more than my say so of who I was and how old.

So, as new arrival to Darwin who wanted to live cheap, I thought I would hang out around the town fringes for a while to get my bearings and know my options. Maybe I could find a way to become someone with a name and a piece of paper to prove it. While I could not think of how I could do it, right then, what I most

wanted was a piece of paper to prove I was Mark Brown as I had grown comfortable in that skin.

When the plane landed in Darwin from Gove I paid for two nights in the Victoria Hotel in the middle of Darwin as a way to find my feet. However it was obvious that spending money at the rate that staying in a hotel entailed would burn through my cash in a way which would soon eat up all my small pile. So I found a good hidey hole in the roof of a disused warehouse where I stashed most of my things that I did not want to carry around. Then I bought a cheap frying pan, billy, tin mug and plate, to let me feed myself, and set out to explore the surrounding bushland looking for a place to hole up. With the rain pretty much gone, sleeping out in the open was fine most nights, but there were still odd nights where big storms build up and the sky sprayed down water. So I wandered through the bush looking for two things, a place near public conveniences like a toilet and shower, but also a place that was secluded and quiet from disturbance. I also wanted somewhere with some easy to use shelter should the rain come at night.

As I walked around I found I was not alone. There were lots of other long grassers, as they called themselves; they were people who camped around the town fringes when the weather was fine. Most had dark skins and had come in from outlying communities in the Top End of the Northern Territory, like the one I had known at Gove. A few had white skins like myself. Some were obvious grog camps from the piles of empty beer cans, wine flagons and rum bottles. I steered clear of these. Others were places where people needing to visit town without much money stayed.

The first night in the bush was a bit stormy so I rolled out my sleeping mat and blanket under a bridge. The one thing I had not fully realised was how bad the mosquitoes were. I had a spray pack of repellent which half worked but still the mosquitoes came buzzing in. The night was hot and steamy. It felt like suffocating to have my face and body covered in a blanket, but without it there was a continuous drone of mosquitoes buzzing around my head, seeking to feed on my face, each time I was falling asleep. I started to think I must find an insect free old building to shelter in, but thought there must be a better way.

Next morning, early, as much to beat the mosquitoes as anything else, I pushed on walking away from Darwin to a place called Nightcliff. Here in the long grass between mangroves and people's houses I found my answer. Here was a scattered camp of long grass people just inland of the mangroves in some open ground. All were sleeping soundly in mosquito nets. I picked my way carefully around their edge until the barking of a dog awakened them and I found myself in the centre of a gathering.

At first they were wary though not hostile, but then a man around my own age from down along the Roper River recognised me. I knew him too.

His name was Lionel, "That be Mark B, what you doing here, Mark B?" He grinned broadly as he was saying it and before long I was introduced to others from the mob, mostly young blokes around his age. And so, with nothing more than a handshake and a shared drink, I became one of them.

One found me an unused mosquito net with only a couple small holes. I hooked it up to a tree branch to use for some extended early morning sleep.

There were a floating dozen or so from the country south of Katherine, who drifted in and out of this group. They came from Mataranka and further east, out towards Roper River, Borroloola and the Gulf. Some were marking time until they headed off, going south to the big cattle station runs of the Barkly Tablelands and Victoria River districts, seeking jobs for the mustering season which was about to start. Some were permanent long grassers and survived by running odd scams which yielded enough money to survive, a few even did bits of casual paid work for when they needed a money to buy something they needed like a new rifle, a fishing rod or new clothes.

I soon settled into the routine of the place, spending about half of my time hanging out with these long grassers, others times going off on my own and getting to know my way around. It was a friendly place. When we had nothing else to do we mostly played cards for small bits of money under big shady trees. Other times people would go fishing or hunting for mud crabs out amongst the mangroves. There was a big tide and when it was in the water came almost to the edge of the mangroves. When it was out you could walk out the other side to big mudflats with channels running between them full of fish, crabs and other sea life. At those times a hand net would rapidly collect enough small fish and shell fish for an easy feed. These blokes taught me the finer arts of fishing with a spear, net and line. For them it was their main source of food, and after a month I had skill to equal the rest, which served me well when I needed to survive in the bush after that.

As time went by they started to teach me and involve me in their scams. They said a whitey was useful as people were more likely to trust me than a blackfella. Few imagined that I and they could be working together.

There was a new casino in Darwin. It fancied its security against cheating was super schmick. So, more as a game than something serious, we set out to find a way to get beat it, first as observers, then minor players, then gradually getting into serious bets. There were six of us in it. Four worked together on any given night to make it less obvious. We also mixed it up with other blokes we met in the bars so as to make it hard for them to spot any pattern.

Our standard way was to have one in play and three watching from different angles so we could spot their own security, both the people and cameras, along with anything else that seemed relevant. We each had a set of plain neat clothes; a white or light collared shirt and dark pants, nothing that looked like it had any hiding places. We became experts at counting cards, at first just Royals to numbers and how many of each of the different Suits. The player would play and watch his cards, one of us cruised around to keep a lookout for their watchers. The other two would each do their own part of the count, using a series of prearranged signals between hands as to what the running tally was.

We realised that with Blackjack, if one could keep track of card types and numbers, it was possible to have a good idea of what cards were already played and what were cards were yet to come in the pile of cards that the dealer had yet to deal. It was not perfect but we developed our signals so we all could know what the up to date count was. If the betting was done slowly and carefully, one could mostly get a winning run. The trick was not to rush it and also to alternate between the players so it was hard for them to spot the pattern. And, most

importantly, not to let on we were mates. This was where the others blokes we met at the bars came in.

We would encourage them to come and play a few hands as part of a chat and a bit of storytelling. And of course they were not in on it. Their wins and losses were as normal, balancing out and covering any pattern we made. Our aim was only to pick up a hundred bucks a night over a couple hours. If we were going too well we would do a few bad plays to bring ourselves back to the pack.

But, by using our system over a week, it was not too hard to pick up an extra five or six hundred bucks which was useful pocket money and kept us in drinks and other things we needed.

In between our nights we would mostly hang around and fill in time, a bit of hunting, a bit of fishing and a bit of general pranking. The wet was properly over now and cool dry season nights were starting. The word was that down the road the mustering season was in full swing. It reached a point where it was time to break up our camp and go separate ways with jobs on different places. We had a loose plan to meet up here again when the Darwin show was on, as most of the ringers were let off for the shows.

So, on the last Saturday night before we went our separate ways, we decided to up the ante and try for some real money. We reckoned that if all six of us took part we could have half playing and half spotting which meant that rather than one player at a time we could have three, one at each of three selected tables. It made the counting a bit harder but by now we were good enough for one person to keep the count running on a table while the other played and then swap it over. At the same time we could all do our part in the surveillance. This night we skipped getting others from the bar to come and join in—that would have made it too complicated.

We set our sights on each walking away with a grand at the end of the night and once we got to this we would call it quits and go home. It only took a bit over two hours of steady play until we had each made our pile, a bit over six thousand in winnings to split between us. We used left over loose change, once we cashed our chips, for a round of drinks, the first we had had together in this place. The others were keen to go and check out a new nightclub. It had a reputation for cheap drinks and hot girls of many colours.

I could have gone with them but decided to stay and watch a bit more play. I was not much of a drinker so I sat at the bar and sipped a light beer, watching how the night ebbed and flowed according to its own patterns.

Our game had felt like a hunt, the quarry was the money and we had to catch this while keeping out of the way of the enemy agents. It had given me a thrill to realise that in less than three hours I could make a thousand by just watching, counting in my head and making an occasional casual play. I did not get high from individual plays but was hooked on watching the patterns emerge, patterns of how cards came out and gradually tipped the odds one way or another on the cards yet to play, different from table to table. Then there was the pattern made by the watching and counting in my head as I kept track of those suits, numbers and pictures; 3 black kings, 4 red queens, 2 black jacks, 5 red nines, one red ten. As this flow proceeded I kept re-working my calculation for which cards tipped the

odds a little in our favour. As my eyes and mind followed this pattern, slowly and surely the money followed.

I had got so good at counting cards, keeping track in my head, that I now could count not only suits and royals but other numbers and colours as well. I had a picture of all these card lists which floated inside my head. It updated as new cards came out without any conscious effort. From this I worked out how the odds shifted for what remained in the pack.

It was simple really, only certain combinations made 21 or Blackjack. As the numbers left in the dealer's deck reduced, so the odds started to swing in certain directions. Early in the dealing of a deck one would place small bets of little moment. But, as the pattern emerged, bets were made with increasing confidence. Of course there were certain decks where the cards came out without a clear pattern. Then one would hold fire or maybe move to a table where the run was different. I had found I could keep up with plays on three tables at a time when I was a watcher. That way I knew which was the best table to come in on.

Tonight the table in the far corner was running the best. The deck was two thirds through and the number of tens and royals out was double where it should be, while the number of cards of five and under was way down. So it seemed a good time to play some draw hands where the others sat on low hands and I pushed for another card without breaking.

I joined in and followed my pattern until the deck was finished and new one was shuffled. I was up five hundred dollars, with no big bets made, just a steady pattern following the one more card theory.

I moved to become a watcher and picked three new tables, one had just gone into a new deck, the others were running along with no real patterns but you never knew, one was a quarter through the deck and the other half way. I watched as around a quarter of each deck was dealt. Two had no real pattern, but the one that was now down to a quarter had just had a huge run of low and high numbers, twos, threes, sevens, eights and nines, mixed with very few royals. Those going for twenty ones were groaning, either sitting on sixteen or busted. I reckoned there must be a big pile of Royals coming along with a fair few fives and sixes, and there had been no aces out as I watched either so the chance of a two card Blackjack was strong.

I decided, all in all, the time was right for me to join the play and boost my winnings. I got a spot as two other players left the table in disgust at their losing hands. I decided to go hard with my full five hundred and see if I could get to three thousand. That would get me to four thousand for the night, a good run but not high enough to draw serious attention. And I could cash that value of chips without requiring an identity check.

So I started in with fifty dollar bets and once I passed another thousand of winnings I upped it to one hundred dollar bets. I only broke three times and each time I was relieved as it made my luck look normal. Now I was up over two thousand and the number of cards remaining in the deck was slim. I decided that I would cut out in two more hands, whatever fell. I pushed five hundred on the bet. It came up and I was now a thousand up so I did a final all or nothing bet using the whole pile from my last play. Again it paid up.

I was now up over another thousand, four and half thousand for a few hours play in a night. That seemed to me like a good return. I went and cashed my pile of chips, playing the role of a punter amazed that I had finally had a lucky night. I had learned how to be a good actor. There was a mix of cheers and backslapping along with the odd jealous or resentful look. For me I was mainly relieved I had made enough in one night to keep me going for a good while without needing to worry about money.

I walked out of the casino into the cooling night air. We had come in at around eight and it was now after midnight, perhaps one in the morning. The sky was clear and the stars were brilliant. I felt good with myself. I had used my wits to earn a lot of money without taking it from anyone who really needed it. My pile was now divided into four places of about a thousand each, a grand in each shoe, a grand in my pants and the last grand plus in my wallet and pockets.

To leave the casino grounds I knew there was a hole I could get through in the back fence which would bring me out to the beach. From there I could walk back to our camp in the long grass taking an hour or so. I strolled across the casino carpark, paying little mind to what was around, feeling good with myself. There was a row of dark trees close to the back fence. I stepped into them, in deep shadow, out of sight.

I must have been off with the fairies, thinking about my winnings and what I would do, as I did not hear or suspect anything until it was too late to duck. In the split second before it connected I heard something move behind me. I turned slightly which spoilt the aim. But it still had collected with a crunching whack. It felt like someone had split my head in two with a rock. Fortunately it hit my neck more than my ear or it would have busted my skull.

I pitched forward tasting sticks and dirt. But I was used to being hit and taking pain. My former rodeo mate, Fred, had drilled and drilled into me how to fight dirty and how to turn defence into attack. Without thought I rolled sideways as I hit the dirt to give me room to move and avoid a second blow.

In the half-light I saw the outline of a big bloke swinging a short length of metal pipe, aiming it for my skull. In his other hand he held a hunting knife, perhaps to deliver the coup de grace. In one movement I found my feet and ducked under the swinging bar. I would have liked to give him something to go on with but I was off balance and he knew it. Plus he was three or four inches taller than me and as many stone heavier, so a close in tussle may not work to my favour, whereas speed and agility might.

Now I could smell his boozy breath. I realised he was half way to getting a skinful, not that it seemed to slow him. Something in him reminded me of my father, a mix of bulk, strength and nastiness in one package. And there was the brutal leering grin, like my father only twenty years younger.

He spat out, with a trace of a slur, "What, not so clever now? You're a sneaky little fucker, trying to slip out the back way with all your dosh. I think you may as well hand it all over to me and pretend we are friends if you don't want to get badly hurt."

As he spoke he waved the knife at me in an ill-directed and half formed thrust. I could tell the booze had slowed his reflexes.

I felt a predatory rage wash through me as he spoke; it felt like a stranger in my body. I knew it was my crocodile totem in control. There was no way I would not let him have my money. Even if he was much bigger I would not be bullied or kowtow to him.

I stepped inside the arc of his knife hand, turning sideways and bringing my knee up under his forearm with all the force I could muster. At the same time I grasped his knife hand wrist with both my hands. I put all my shoulder power into my hands which drove his wrist down, At the same time I put all my leg power into my rising knee. My knee connected with a crack as his forearm snapped. He let out a grunt, half pain, half surprise. In the blink of an eye I took the knife from his limp hand and shoved it into his side where his kidneys were. Before he could pull away from this I withdrew it and using all my force, holding the knife in both hands, I shoved it up under his rib cage in the direction of his heart, thinking, *Die you bastard!*

It seemed he heard me. His eyes locked on mine showing fear. He stood there for a second with a surprised look on his face before he crumpled, to the ground, without sound. I stood watching, for a minute or two, until I was certain he was dead. There was little blood as I pulled the knife out.

Thinking this was a bad place for his body to be found, I realised I needed a way to get rid of him. I did a search to see if he had identity documents on him. I found a wallet with a couple hundred dollars and keys to a vehicle. The keys gave me an idea, thinking it meant he had parked a car nearby, probably in the casino carpark. I looked closely at the keys; they had a Holden logo and were like the keys of a Holden ute I drove when taking rubbish from the mine to the tip at Gove.

I decided I would carefully and systematically search the casino carpark in the hope I could find his vehicle. If so I could use this to take his body away and get rid of it. It took twenty minutes to find it. A couple times I had to duck out of sight as other patrons came back to their cars. As I spotted it I knew which one it was, as expected a battered Holden Ute was parked in a distant corner of the carpark where few would come.

I put the keys in. The engine turned over easily and with little noise as it started. After a few seconds of looking around for any observers I drove as normally as I could to the corner of the car park closest to the trees where his body was. I reversed in as far as I could go. No one was in sight so I lifted his body onto the tailgate, rolled him into the back, closed it up and drove away.

The absence of interest or scrutiny seemed total. I parked under some street lights in a quiet industrial street with no houses. I searched him more thoroughly getting nothing further. He did not look so much older than me and bore a strange resemblance to a more adult me in his face even though his body was much heavier.

I pulled out his license from his wallet. Again the photo was not unlike me, it hid the fleshiness of the real person, the fat around the midline and the start of a double jowl from too much beer and good living. It looked like it was taken a couple years before when he was quite close to my age.

It was funny, even his name was a half match to the one I used, Martin Bennet, another MB with Mart, the short form, not unlike Mark. His driver's license had a residential address for a flat in Adelaide which I knew was in a poor area and his

car had South Australian plates. It seemed a fair chance that he was not much known up this way.

The idea formed in my mind that he was an itinerant traveller, like me, and must have acted on the spur of the moment to mug another traveller for easy cash. With success he would have driven away with his profits, heading for another town. The things in the back that his ute indicated it served as a mobile house, it was part filled with what looked like his things.

I thought, *Why don't I do like it seems he was intending; drive off down the highway with my winnings of the night.* Along the way I would find a good place to stash his body, in the bush or a river. Then I could continue on my way as if I was him, flashing his license for identity if needed. I would teach myself to forge his signature so I could sign for things as if I was him too. If nothing else it would help to hide where he vanished laying a false trail in his name as he I travelled along.

In my mind I satisfied myself I could do it and it would not be hard to pull it off if I went about it with confidence, holding my hand out and saying to those I met, "Hi, I am Mart Bennet", showing his license in places like motels and grog shops where they asked for proof of identity.

I would at least try it for a day or two until I found out more about him and decided if he was likely to be missed and properly searched for. I would watch out for stories of him being reported missing in the newspapers, TV and radio and, if they seemed to be looking for him, I would ditch his car and identity documents, just keeping my own cash, and vanish, back to my own MB persona, far out on a station somewhere.

Chapter 14

A New Identity.

Now my name was Mart Bennet and I had a license to prove it, with a photo that could pass as me.

Before morning came I found a roadhouse that sold fuel and odd things. I filled up the petrol tank and as well bought a plastic tarp and a locality map. I used the tarp to cover all his things in the back along with his body.

After I studied the map for a few minutes I realised there was a big river about half an hour's drive to the east. Signs indicated it was a place of many crocodiles. It also had a sign for a boat ramp near the main road. It was now between two and three am, with at least another three hours of darkness. I figured if I drove straight there it was unlikely I would have company.

It was just after three on the car clock when I got there. I found some old rope and tied it to some heavy tools which I lashed around this dead man's ankles. Then I half dragged and half carried him the last couple metres from the back of the ute to the edge of the murky water that swirled past as the river ran out to sea. There was a strong out-running tide so I pushed him into knee deep water and let

the current take him. The current pulled the body away from the ramp heading downstream and the weight pulled him under. In a second he was gone.

Looking back I wonder if I should have felt something more; regret at what I had done or remorse that I was becoming an ever more accomplished killer. But I did not feel it then and do not now. He tried to hurt and rob me, maybe even kill me. In a law of the jungle land, where each must look after himself, I did what was right and proper. The fact that he would try to harm me when I had done nothing to him made him forfeit of any human rights. So his end was fitting. He was no loss to the world, at least not to any part of the world I knew or cared about. There was even an added benefit that he fed one or more of my crocodile spirit brothers, those of my totem. As I drove away I imagined them tearing off parts of his body to feed their need. It felt fitting and right.

The next few days I worked myself slowly south following the Stuart Highway through a range of small towns, Katherine, Mataranka, Elliot, Tennant Creek, and three days later Alice Springs. Each night I checked into a motel under the name Martin Bennet at showed his license, which was taken as proof of him without a second glance. Each night I watched the TV news for any reports of him being missing. There were none. Funnily, as I drove into Alice Springs, just before the town began, there was a police road block and they were doing random breath tests for drink drivers. They glanced at my license and I felt a momentary panic moment lest the man had been more lately reported missing to them or they did not think I matched the license, but it passed inspection with a cursory glance. With a quick thank you it was returned to me.

My life thus far had taught me to both be a fatalist and trust my luck. After that day I felt I really had occupied this new MB person and his alter ego belonged to me by right to use as I saw fit.

Along the way I fully searched the vehicle. From it I gathered scraps of his past. One was a letter from a sister from three months before, still in an envelope that had been readdressed to Darwin from his Adelaide address in a different hand. So it seemed she had not even known he had left Adelaide. There were two letters from past girlfriends but they were old. Last was a second letter from his sister, a year ago, telling him his mother was dead. He must have got it at his Adelaide address, its original envelope was still around it. There was nothing in the sister's letter about a father or any other family so I assumed they were either unimportant or absent. Then there were a few photos from the distant past of a teenage him with a sister and mother so it seemed that was the whole family and, judging by the tone of the letters, he was hardly close to either. So, all in all, it seemed he was a good person from whom to take an identity.

I still had a niggling curiosity about his past life and, with no better plans, I decided to drive on to Adelaide and call to his former address on the pretext of seeking to find him, as an old friend, at his last known address. That way I could see if there was anyone there who knew him or knew where he had gone. It might add a bit more to his life story to help me inhabit it better.

A week after helping Martin meet his crocodile destiny I met his former flatmate at the Adelaide address. I told him the story of having met Martin a while ago, having done a few days' work with him up north, keeping the story vague. I said Martin had left a couple things behind. So, having this address and coming

through Adelaide, I thought I should try to contact him to see if he wanted these things back.

There was clearly little love lost with his former flatmate. He told me how Martin has skipped town owing him a month of rent and had nicked the kitty of shopping money for good measure. He suggested I sell off anything Martin had left behind and keep the proceeds, it would serve him right.

I said I would do just that. I asked what Martin owed as I would make a bit out of selling his gear. He said Martin owed him two hundred dollars. So I pulled out the cash which had been in Martin's wallet and gave it to him. He said that was good and it was all square now. With that he went and found a few of Martin's other bits and pieces that he had left behind plus the further mail that had come in his absence. He gave these to me saying I might as well keep them as well in the event that I could get any value from them or, if not, to throw them in the bin.

That night I went through all the new things belonging to Martin that I had gained. In the mail I found a two more letters from old friends, as well as one of Martin's own letters. It appeared he had written to his sister and had forgotten to post it as it was dated a few months before.

This was great. I now could copy his hand writing and his writing style in a good approximation if needed. And I had another version of his signature to use for correspondence with family or friends should there be a call for it.

Most important in the mail was a renewal notice for his driver's license and vehicle registration along with a new Medicare card with his name on it. I was delighted. With all these things I felt I was fully part of this identity.

The next day I called to the Motor Registry Office, got a new license issued in his name, with my own photo on it, as well as renewed registration papers for his vehicle, good for another year. I was certain that by then the vehicle would have been sold and long gone. The car was running OK but it was showing its age and I did not expect it to last too much longer. Plus it was best to get rid of all things from Martin's past life which could tie him to me.

The final thing I did that day was practised Martin's hand writing and signature until I had something that looked close to his in style and words. I bought another envelope, put his letter to his sister in it, and wrote a short slip which I put with it, using his terms.

'Hey Sis, forgot to post this before last trip, so here it is now. I am off again for a bit, working up north, will catch up or write on return. In the meantime if you can find a copy of my birth certificate could you post it to me care of Alice Springs Post Office.'

I did not know if the request would work but it seemed low risk and was worth a try in further building my identity. If she sent me a birth certificate I might try to carefully change my name to Mark Bennet and then, using this, remove the Martin name from the other records, say an error was made on my license or something similar to get it amended.

I left Adelaide next day feeling well pleased.. As I drove north, heading for the Flinders Ranges, I made up my mind to make a stopover in Quorn for old time's sake. In the local shop, where I had first met Jack Jones I saw a sign advertising the Carrieton Rodeo on this weekend.

I felt a pang of nostalgia for this past life. This was a rodeo Fred and I had not done in our year on the road. Another livestock supplier had the contract. But Fred had said we would go the next year, whether we had the job or not. He told me it was one of the best rodeos in Australia and that he had many mates who would be riding there he wanted to share a rum with.

On impulse and because I felt a yen to connect with that good part of my past life when Fred had treated me like a son, albeit with plenty of tough love thrown in, I decided I would go there for the event. I still felt flush with cash from my NT casino winnings.

It was not on for another four days so I was tempted to look up the people on the stations around Quorn, particularly those who might know Jack Jones. I found myself thinking of him with affection and wondering if he still worked at Oorooroo, remembering too his first horse breaking lessons. He had taught me well. He was a pretty slick horseman himself, if not quite in Fred's class. But it seemed a bit high risk to go back there after I had done my disappearing act, lest the police had me listed for further questioning and someone felt obliged to inform them.

But Carrieton was not too close and I now had a proper identity, not that I wanted it given too much scrutiny yet. So instead I got a gun license, bought a 223 and went to the northern Flinders Ranges to try my hand at hunting the king billy goats up on the big mountains. This was something Fred and I had talked about doing together. It pleased me to do it with his memory riding alongside me, as I ranged these hills with my gun. I named the biggest billy I got with a huge head and set of horns, *King Fred Billy McGorrie*. I tied the head and horns to the front of my car and when I got to the pub in the next town the publican asked to buy them and send them to the taxidermist to mount on his pub wall. I told him he could have it for free provided he used the name I had given it as a memorial to the famous rodeo rider.

He agreed and two years later when I passed through I saw it mounted there. The name plate read, *King Fred Billy McGorrie* and underneath said, *Named in memory of the famous rodeo rider and contractor Fred McGorrie, who loved to hunt in these hills.*

I felt I had done one thing to keep Fred's name alive and was glad.

Chapter 15

Name of Breaker MB.

It was strange to be back in a rodeo, this time as a contestant. I entered the Open Saddle Bronc and Bareback Events. I fancied myself as a serious chance of riding time in the first. The second was a long shot as my bareback riding experience was limited. But I understood what was required and had done bits of it when working for Fred. It was often too much trouble to saddle up a horse to run a nearby mob into the yards or cut out a few steers. So, at these times, at first

under his direction, I had put a bridle on a handy horse's head and jumped on its back.

When I registered I showed my driver's license, but only as a quick flash with my thumb half over my first name. That way the Mar part was visible but the rest remained hidden. I told them my name was Mark Bennet but I preferred to go by the name MB.

I rode time in the heats of both events. My scores were mediocre as the horses I were given were not much more than slightly wild stock horses. But it got me into the finals on the Saturday night of these two feature events.

I found there were several contestants I knew slightly. We were soon bantering, as in years before, chatting about the places they came from, other rodeos and horses they rode. Several offered condolences about Fred and introduced me further around. Odd ones used my first name Mark, but I always corrected it to MB as both memorable and giving anonymity.

So, after I had got into both finals, people started to hail me as MB and ask what I thought about a range of things; the weather, the horses, the girls, the other stock, who I fancied for the bull ride—the list went on. I joined in keenly, in part to build my name and improve the chance of drawing a good horse in the finals, but also because I felt strangely at home in this company.

On Saturday afternoon we finalists drew for the horses we would ride that night. I had eyed them off in the yard and liked a big black late cut gelding with a half mad look in his eye, as if he would do his best to smash anything, man, horse or bullock, that got in his way. I was told his name was Crackerjack. He was in the Saddle Bronc event and I hoped to draw him. I co pictured him rearing and twisting from side to side as he threw everything into dislodging me. The word was that he was fresh this year to the rodeo circuit after badly busting up a rider on a station who tried to break him. He had yet to have anyone last more than five seconds on board his back.

As luck would have it my name was drawn against his. I felt sure it was an omen of good fortune.

In the Bareback it was less clear-cut who I wanted, there were several horses that looked pretty mean. But looks can be deceiving and I thought one of the less obvious choices may give the best show. In this case I decided that I would be happy to take whatever luck threw my way. Instead I would use a couple tricks Fred had taught me, that would get a fizz out of even the tamest horse, to bolster my chances.

Saturday afternoon wore on slowly and I could feel a tingling buzz of excitement in the pit of my stomach as I waited for the evening festivities to begin. I locked out fear and focused on my desire to succeed in those split seconds where only my skill and reflexes would count.

At last the evening events were underway, first the clowns and all the hoopla along with girls trying to burst out of shiny sequined suits. Then it was down to business. Bareback was the first featured event. I had my drawn a handy looking horse, a chestnut with a big blaze called Devil's Stripe. My ride was the eighth of twelve finalists. We would come out of the far right chute, the end furthest from the judge's box. The horse would come out with his head pointing away from the

box. I decided that my first action was to get him to swing around and head directly in front to give the best view.

The first seven had done some handy rides. A couple of their horses had bucked well but none of the riders had made time. So it felt to me that my timing for a big ride was right.

I settled down onto the muscles of the back, knowing I had a few sharp prickles in my pants that would liven up any horse. I felt him flinch as he took my weight and, for good measure, I put my heels into the tender places at the back of his flanks and felt him flinch some more. I felt a bit sorry for the discomfort I was causing but it was needed for a good performance.

Devil's Stripe snorted in anger at my goading as the gate began to swing open. He surged out spinning his head to try and see the hateful thing that was on his back. As his head swung around I went with the motion and used the halter rope to bring him fully round until we were facing the opposite way. The horse was put slightly off centre by my unexpected move. I let him settle enough to regain his balance before driving in the spurs. We were off in a mad rushing twisting dance. Twice he spun in the air and it took all my strength to hold my body locked to his. After that it was into a final series of straight line bucks before the bell rang time.

I was vaguely aware of the commentator saying, "Well ladies, gentleman, I think you will agree that was really a fine ride," as the cheers rang out.

In the distance I heard someone calling out, "Three cheers for Breaker MB," I looked across to see Jack Jones waving and cheering, the last person I had expected to see tonight.

I felt incredibly proud that he had been there to witness my success, but I had another ride to go to finish the night. I focused in on blocking out the chatter of the crowd and getting one more under my belt.

I barely remember the second ride, but I know it was touch and go that I stayed on. I was drawn to ride last after topping the Bareback score, with just one other rider making time before me.

Crackerjack did not need any help from me to perform, the meanness was all his own. I could feel he wanted to kill me. But it was not personal, just a hatred of all things people or animals who would try to get in his way. I could sense in him a kindred spirit of rage against those who had or would try to hurt him, starting with his gelding and branding and continuing forward through all his human encounters. In the seconds before we exploded from the chute I touched my soul to his hurting soul and let him know that I had been in that place too, that my seeking to ride him was just a thing I had to do, not a desire to hurt him further. His spirit reached an uncompromising truce with mine, he would seek his best to break me or fling me in the dirt and I would seek to be the master of the ride. But there it would end and whoever was the winner we would both accept the outcome.

With those brief milliseconds of accommodation it was on and we both exploded into the arena. The ten seconds seemed to last forever yet went in a heartbeat. I can remember looking down at the black horse twisting below me from a great height above the saddle, my feet still in the stirrups but a metre of clear air between my butt and his back. It happened at least twice. Somehow I returned to and held my seat each time and stayed in place there no matter what.

And then it was over. I could not hear the bell but knew it had rung as a huge cheer erupted. Many people were shouting, the Breaker, the Breaker, the Breaker has returned.

When the noise eased the commentators voice came booming out from the loudspeakers saying, "Well ladies and gentlemen, I think we all agreed that that is the best bucking performance and the best ride we have been privileged to see in many a year."

It was good I had ridden last as it would have been hard for another rider to follow me. Soon the judges returned a near perfect score, with a couple minor markdowns for technical finesse which I was happy to concede.

It was a strange night from which I only recall odd flashes.

There was a presentation when I held my prizes aloft to the cheering crowd, there was Jack Jones shaking my hand, telling me he was real proud to know me, that I was creating a new legend like the Breaker had 100 years before. There was holding the winner's cheque in my hand for ten thousand dollars for my two rides, there were drinks and food plied on me, offers of contracts and jobs in vast profusion. Finally there was a girl, one of the rodeo queens. She chose to gift me with her body for the night and brought me to her bed. It was memorable and wonderful and yet.

And yet it seemed wrong to be placed in the company of my childhood hero, The Breaker. It was true I had ridden well. I had a sixth sense with horses, like he did. But, over many, many years, he demonstrated skills far above anything I owned.

I was immensely flattered to be applauded for my horsemanship. I felt that most thanks belonged to JJ and Fred for each one's arduous training. But it seemed this ride placed me in the footsteps of a name with huge boots to fill before I truly deserved it. Part of me felt this was very far beyond me and that is always would be thus.

I woke in the morning dreaming crocodile dreams and with my totem in my hand. It seemed that, in the last reaches of the night, just before dawn, a part of this crocodile being had slipped inside my soul, a shared presence alongside my own spirit. My rodeo queen slumbered in the swag beside me, looking sleep mused but very beautiful in the dawn light. Part of me wanted to wake and possess her again.

But it seemed unseemly for me to be lusting for her in the dawn; it was as if it was a continuation of the excess of adulation of the night past.

I realised again the swag was her own bed to which she had brought me and now wanted only to be gone.

So quietly, without disturbing her or the others who slumbered yet, I made my way to my car and drove away, ten thousand dollars and two trophies richer, flushed with trappings of success but most wanting a quiet life in another place far away.

Chapter 16

Middle East Security.

Three years passed and I was twenty. I had grown into my manhood. Of girls I had had plenty, of nights of hard drinking and knuckle fighting more than a few. I continued to work as a horse breaker out around the stations of the Northern Territory and Kimberley, choosing the worst and hardest horses to master. I had a small reputation as a handy horseman and as someone good to have at your back in a bar room brawl. I had escaped the adulation of that night at Carrieton, no one from there had found me here.

I was making a steady living from my skills with twenty thousand dollars in the bank. I had as much as I wanted of what money would buy.

I had an up to date Holden ute registered in the name of Mark Bennet, thanks to a minor change made to the birth certificate which the sister had duly posted. I paid a good artwork man a tidy sum to alter it professionally and none was the wiser. So Martin Bennet had vanished, last known address 'Alice Springs GPO' and a new MB was in his place but unconnected, the last one's car sold in his own name to a wreckers when the engine began to die.

Now I had the full pack of identity documents for the new Mark Bennet, even an Australian passport, lest I should want to go travelling abroad one day. I was surprised how easy it had all been to become another person. Vincent Mark Bassingham was fast fading into the mists of time, like one Martin Bennet, a vanished soul, one last seen in the far out reaches of Never Never Land. This was what I had taken to calling the outback after reading the book, *We of the Never Never* set in the Roper River the same year the real Breaker breathed his last. It seemed an auspicious year, though this history was now lost from living memory.

As the storms built out on the black soil plains of the Barkly Tablelands, on the station where I was breaking in the colts for next year's mustering plant, I thought about where I should go next. It had been over three years since last in Queensland, though this station was only a half hours drive from the border town of Camooweal. I could head up north to Darwin as had been my wet season custom these last years. But Queensland was closer and I felt a change coming.

I decided I would go to Cairns, I had not been there before and it seemed to have become the new mecca for visitors to the reef of the backpacker set. It had its own international airport and one would regularly see posters of rainforest and reef in the tourist shops of the town where I stopped over on odd nights. I remembered fondly a couple delectable backpacker travellers, ones who started from there, became company in outback bars and shared a swag and the road for a night or two; there was a German girl called Carla who had taught me new tricks in the loving games and there was a sweet innocent thing called Caroline from the States who had come to my bed. She needed a little persuasion, but in the end had come willingly, despite a boy she told me she was madly in love with back home. Once she was there she put him from her mind and enjoyed herself without restraint. I enjoyed her too, many times over three nights, before her time to leave had come. There were others too, but those were two whose names I still knew.

In Cairns, flush with wages from breaking a dozen new horses, I hung around the town for a few days. I picked up a couple girls, but found myself a bit bored with the sameness. It was a nice town; the scenery was beautiful, particularly up

in the mountains. I remembered with pleasure learning to snorkel at Magnetic Island and on the reef at Great Keppel Island some years before. I decided I would learn to dive properly, the way it is done with scuba tanks like you see on TV. So I enrolled in a high end course, the money was no object as I had little else to spend it on. It was a course run from a 'live on' boat which cruised the outer reef over a week.

I struck up an instant casual friendship with the dive instructor, a friendly young bloke, Rod, a couple years older. He liked the girls much the same way I did and was happy to share his cabin bed with a different one each different nights, as did I. We traded stories of girls and work over beers most nights. He, like me, had a hard edge, brought up tough by a single mother. He had made his own way in the world from an early age.

I told him of my work as a horse breaker and of other odd things. He told me of a previous job he had for a rich dude in the Middle East, an oil wealthy sheik, teaching this man's wealthy visitors to dive, out in the sparkling clear waters of the Arabian Gulf. This sheik had several boats, from dive boats like ours to luxury sailing yachts. And he had a whole stable of horses of the best Arabian bloodlines, all paid for with oil money. So when I told Rod I could ride a bit and had won a couple rodeo riding prizes in the outback he gave me a card with the Sheik's business manager, his name was Abdul followed by something unpronounceable.

Rod said, if I was looking for something new to do I should contact this man, mention his name, 'Rod Shipley', and I would probably be offered a job. Apparently the place was a minor principality, not too far from Dubai. I knew I could fly to Dubai and travel on from there easily enough. It sounded like being different and interesting, so I put the card in my wallet and thanked him, thinking, *Who Knows!*

Next week in Cairns I checked out the flights to the Middle East. Before I knew it I was in Dubai. I spent a week in Dubai getting to know my way around. I hired a car and drove here and there. I went on a couple tours, and at other times hung around tourist resorts, seeing what was on offer. I did some minor bits and pieces of work but the pay was poor as I was competing against low paid workers from Philippines and other Asian countries.

So I pulled out the card and rang Abdul from a hotel phone. When he answered he sounded like the polite but bored business man, endlessly rung by people with more money than sense to do their bidding. But once I said the name, 'Rod Shipley', the voice changed instantly. It became a touch oily and much more calculating but definitely interested. He asked how I knew Mr Shipley and I told him I had trained in diving under him. He then asked what else I did?

I said, "Well I mostly work on large Australian stations, where I train the horses for others to ride. I get them quiet, teach them good manners, most years I break in about two hundred horses.

I could hear the cogs whirring in his brain. Before I knew it he arranged to meet me in Dubai in two days' time, where he would be coming on his boss's private jet for a business meeting. He gave me the address of an upmarket hotel where he would be staying and told me to meet in the hotel lobby at six sharp.

I don't know what I expected but it was not the Abdul I met, perhaps I had imagined someone older, paunchy and a bit oily and suave. Instead here was a fit young man in his thirties who wore authority effortlessly like a well-tailored coat.

He was both well-educated and practical with a can do attitude. It turned out he was a favourite nephew of the Sheik. He had been put into a position of almost absolute power by his uncle's huge wealth and influence. All the day to day decisions over the empire fell to him. He did them with both a pleasant manner and ruthless efficiency.

We talked a little bit as he assessed me, a brief touch on my knowledge of Rob Shipley and diving, then an in depth discussion about horses and their management which he described as a shared passion between his uncle and himself. They both loved to ride out across the sand hills on a magnificent stallion, falcon on wrist. And they both loved the feel of a horse stretched out at a flat gallop, riding it through the seat of their pants.

All this was as familiar to me as breathing. In short minutes I was sharing my stories too. Our conversation flowed in a rapid fire of horse anecdotes for half an hour. Suddenly he looked at his watch, with an, "Oh I must go." He stood to leave. As he did he wrote a number on a napkin on the table and pointed to it. The number was a five and three zeroes.

"I trust that will be enough, weekly I mean!"

I nodded feeling stunned; it would have been a good monthly wage.

As he walked away, almost as an afterthought he called out, See you here tomorrow at nine, we will ride the jet back. You can demonstrate your riding prowess in the afternoon.

The stables were magnificent, better than most houses I had lived in. And the horses were more magnificent. My regular day began with taking a selection of the best young ones out for a run in the early dawn, one with me on its back and another half dozen on long running leads. I alternated the one I rode, but always chose a young skittish animal with a lot of potential. The ones I brought with me were a mix of unbroken and fresh broken. The idea was that running in a controlled mob would get them used to working in a tight group, teaching them to relax into work and giving them the thrill of running as part of work, stretching out and feeling the power of their own muscles drive them own, wind in their manes and scattering all before them.

I loved this time as much as the horses, it was my own piece of personal freedom in an otherwise controlled day. On return I would breakfast with the stable manager, Wasim, and at times others, often Abdul and the Sheik were there too. We would discuss the work of the day; daily exercise routines, treatments of horses which needed special attention, track-work for horses in racing, service of mares, feeding routines, maintenance of the paddocks and stables. With over 200 horses and 50 in active work there was always much to be done. Abdul and the Sheik took a close personal interest.

I had a team of half a dozen jockeys and stable lads who did much of the hard labour, though I often worked side by side with them as I had learned the value of an example set by hard work and not shirking the menial tasks, the mucking out of stables, raking the sand and picking up the manure.

It was a good life, not much time for play but I was always happiest when busy. Over a year I got to know in detail how it worked and others involved. I knew only slightly the many others who worked across the Sheik's empire, his hotels and business operations, his oil wells, his fleet of planes, boats and cars, his factories

which provided local employment. And, of course, there was this property, not only a horse stud but a highly productive farm, a delta land area of fertile alluvial flats where irrigation which produced a variety of produce, crops of grains and legumes, vegetables and fruit, milk and cheese, much sold through vendors in local markets. As time went by I became more involved in the day to day running of the whole farm.

It was a benevolent empire of a sort. Overall the sheik was a good man. He wanted to do right by his people but, of course, with such power and wealth, opportunities grow for petty tyrants and little corruptions in those who serve the master. Abdul was a good man too, moulding himself to the Sheik's image. I found out he had a Master's Degree in Business Management from Harvard, but he had started out, as his Uncle's teenage favourite, doing all the farm work, such as I was doing now, alongside him. He was fiercely loyal to his Uncle. He also wanted to do right by those who depended on or worked for his Uncle. But he was ruthless in those he caught out in cheating or petty tyrannies, I once saw him take a cane to a man he found cheating in the markets. So, overall, any corruption was largely controlled.

One of my favourite things to do with Abdul was ride into the mountains at the back of the farm, taking our guns, and hunt for something for the pot. Often it was only a rock rabbit or game bird, but at times we got one of the wild goats that lived on the high rocky crags, just occasionally an antelope. Abdul was a skilled marksman, having been hunting with his Uncle since his childhood. However, with Fred's shooting tuition I was even better, having been taught all the tricks that wily rodeo man had learned in his half century of living on the land.

Now I taught these little things to Abdul and he improved too, until he was almost, but not quite, my equal in this. As we walked we talked and became more and more friends. I told him more of my early life than anyone since Fred. He told of his life too, the good and the bad. He had a philosophy of an eye for an eye, and said he would gladly kill anyone who tried to hurt him or his family and had done so in the past. I in turn told him about how I had killed the man at the remand home by pushing him down the stairs and was glad. I did not tell him about the others but he understood that in a hard world one did these things.

It seemed the kingdom was prospering under the rule of Abdul and his Uncle, that the people were relatively well off and happy and the country was safe and stable. However in the second year I started to hear rumours of troubles at the oil wells, causing production to be disrupted leading to loss of income for this tiny nation.

In talking to Abdul, as I regularly did about all matters, in his confidante way he started to explain it to me one day, "The problem is those blacks who are getting in from North Africa, coming across the Gulf. We mostly deport them back to where they came as we do not want them settling here and causing trouble. But my neighbouring sheik has allowed a camp for these people who they call refugees to be built. Now, more than 1000 are living there, mostly bored young men with nothing to do. They have started to form gangs and go on night time raids. At first it was little things, stealing odd tools they could sell, maybe some goods and equipment like a vehicle from the compound. Those things we could tolerate, we warned them off and those we caught we took on a boat back to Africa. But they

soon came back. Now they have grown much bolder, starting to attack our workers at the wells or destroy the pipes and pumping equipment. Sometimes it is to steal oil and sell it, but mostly it is just to cause trouble. So I need to find a solution that stops them. I could throw them in jail, but that would just fill up our jails with undesirables. And of course once we released them they would go back to their old ways.”

A week later Abdul called me to an urgent meeting with his head of oil well security, an ex-military man of French extraction who had served in the French Foreign Legion, Claude. He was grizzled and tough looking from years in the sun, but he had a ready smile which I took to.

Abdul opened up, “As you know Claude and I are having trouble with our oilwell security, black men in gangs from Africa who come across the border. So far we have tried to warn them off. But it is not working. Now they have become even bolder. Last night a gang of five or six damaged the pumps at a well and we will lose a month of production until it is fixed. Because the worst we have done is to beat up a couple, put some in jail and take others back to Africa, they think they can do what they like with no consequences. Now I want there to be consequences, big consequences. I think we need to discover the ringleaders and get rid of them. I am asking you to help Claude do this. Think of it like our days of hunting an elusive antelope. Once you have them in your sights you take your chance and end it. That was all the instructions we were given but it was enough.”

Abdul left Claude and myself to work out how it was done. We spent a week watching until we knew the patterns of where they came and went, done in the dark of night. Claude had the latest night vision gear so we could watch undetected. Within a week we knew who the leaders and other main players were. Then we put our plan into action taking turns.

On the first night I was the sniper and he was the scout and on the next night we reversed roles. We decided we did not want to kill them all because we needed a message of fear to get back. On the first night I took out two with head shots from 200 metres, like I would a mountain goat. There were six working their way through the dunes next to a well, thinking they were hidden from view in the desert. Once I had made my shot we sat and waited. Their leader fell to the ground with a hole the size of an orange where the bullet came out of the back of his head.

After some silent consternation where they looked, checked and tried to work out from where this bullet came, they reformed and came on. I waited in my hide until they had passed me by. Then, as they were getting to the far edge of my shooting range, I took another, this one I shot in the back of the head from behind. The bullet blew his face apart as it exited from the front. Now, in terror, they all scattered, running off like jack rabbits back in the direction they had come.

The next night we repeated it with Claude as the sniper. Another group came. This time he took one from behind, shot between the shoulders. The second was at close range from in front with a solid from a shotgun. It with blew his chest apart as they came running back from where the first shot had come.

Each night, before dawn, we took the bodies and threw them down the hole of an abandoned well nearby. We preferred there to be no evidence for the daytime workers to see.

After those two nights none came again for a week. We sat and watched and waited, unwilling to believe they would be so easily discouraged. Sure enough, ten days later, another group came, much more wary this time. They came in two groups of five, coming from different ways. When Claude and I had sighted them we made a plan to each take the leader of the different groups. We got into position and counted down our shots, me calling my count into his headpiece earphone. I did not hear his shot but saw the muzzle flash within a second of mine.

After this it all became quiet for a couple weeks and then there was a flare up at another oil well and we took our surveillance to this site. This time taking out one trouble maker sufficed. From then only sporadic and low level disturbances occurred.

Once the main event was under control I resumed my work on the farm, now as the trouble shooter working under Abdul's direction when problems arose such as some minor cheating or pilfering. I don't know how it was but the word had got around that I was not someone to be trifled with. So a few quiet words from me were normally enough to resolve the situation.

From time to time Claude and I would catch up for a quiet drink. We would shoot the breeze with our ideas and plans. I still loved early morning rides with the young horses. Since getting rid of troublemakers my pay had more than doubled.

However, as the second year drew on, I found I was becoming bored with the same old routines and I could feel a similar restlessness filling Claude with our easy life. So it was not a surprise when he came one November night, asking if I was interested in becoming part of a group of mercenaries he was putting together for the African Congo. It was to try and assist some local ruler in restoring order. He had already put time into African campaigns and warned me that they were hard, dangerous and thankless jobs and that those who rule were often as bad as those in revolt.

But, like me, Claude thrived on excitement and the pay offered was excellent so he had said yes. Now he was calling all his former colleagues who chafed for some action.

We gave our notice to Abdul and a month later assembled in Nairobi in preparation for travelling via Lake Victoria to the eastern Congo where our services were required.

Chapter 17

Congo.

It was a hard, brutal little series of skirmishes in jungles and village fields. Our side was supposed to be the underdog, fighting a government that was butchering its citizens from the long tribe in one of the outlying provinces. It sounded like right should be on our side, the fight of the underdog against the oppressor. If only

it were so and there was some moral superiority that lay with one side. But if it was there I could see no sign of it.

Both sides were happy to rape and murder any bystanders with impunity and I became one of them. Thus far I had only really killed for a clear cause and avoided women or bystanders. Here it was often impossible to tell who was who. Viciousness and violence happened on both sides, with torture and mutilation widespread.

Frequently it was a woman with a machete or a gun who took the lead. I am told it was not so different from many other conflicts, like that in Rwanda, where it was much about ethnic cleaning, wiping out the nearby tribe with justification a mix of old grievance and current greed for resources.

This mentality affected us all. Soon we were all acting as animals, any civilised behaviour forgotten. I joined in this role along with the others. Here I killed my first woman. She was caught smuggling weapons to the other side. Her fate was to be raped by any who wanted her and then shot if she was lucky and worse was not done to her instead. More often than not death came slowly with serial mutilations over hours or days.

She had been beautiful once before the ravages of fists and bodies had damaged her, but she still had fight in her eyes as she tried to spit at me.

I came close, with catcalls to take my turn. There was something in the fire she breathed I found alluring. I am not sure what I would have done, thinking of her with desire and yet also feeling sorry.

I bent down, coming close as she lay naked on her back. As I came close she grabbed my arm and pulled it towards her. She sunk her teeth into my forearm, biting down with all her might. I felt the rage course through me to match hers. With the hard edge of my other hand I hit her neck with all my power, at the place where it joined her head. I felt the bones give.

She collapsed into the dirt, leaving me with a bleeding arm. I felt more pleased than sad it was over for her. While I had not acted out of kindness I knew the other ending would have been much worse.

There was something in this act that told me, once and for all that this war was hopeless. We, as mercenaries, were merely helping one brutal regime against another. Whatever success came to the winner would be an end result as awful as what the loser would have done.

But I loved Africa and was not willing to leave. I had learned enough of the customs and lingo to be comfortable amongst these dark skinned people. Despite horrors which life inflicted on them they had a joy in togetherness and their daily activities that was irrepressible.

So I drifted from town to town and village to village, rationing out my money, doing occasional work for bartered goods, a few corn cobs or a piece of meat. I worked for weeks with fishermen on Lake Victoria, my pay was a few fish and some fermented drink.

I decided I would work my way south, seeing what was on offer, using cash money for minor bribes to cross borders and other things as required. My military training in the Congo had taught me many more combat skills, particularly those needed for in close hand to hand fighting. So even though I was occasionally threatened by hopeful thugs I was confident in my ability to deal with two or three

at once with no great trouble. Only occasionally did I have to resort to injuring or killing someone to get away.

I came at last to Botswana. There I got a job as a safari guide for well-heeled tourists. The two tests I had to pass was to have good English and manners to the paying guests and to be able to shoot straight under pressure in the face of a charging lion or elephant. This part came easy to me and provided the tourists were half decent it was easy to treat them well. However the odd one who tried to bully me or other staff in my presence got short shrift. I have always found the presence of bullies to be intolerable, particularly when they try to use their power over weak powerless people. But I held this part of my just enough in check to get by, and the occasional ones I put in their place were well-deserving.

I spent a year there, loving the animals and mostly enjoying showing the people and the wonders of this place. But, once again as the first year drifted towards a second year, I found myself becoming bored with mundane life which drifted on, in lots of days and weeks.

Unsure what I was looking for. I caught a bus going north west, heading for Angola. This was a country I knew almost nothing about except there was an unending war civil there. Looking back, after what I had found out about these little, dirty wars in the Congo, I think it should have dissuaded me. But somehow it did not and the Portuguese history and strange names drew me towards it, a new part of the dark heart.

Chapter 18

Brother of the Crocodile.

On the bus I found myself sitting next to a fit young man who looked about my age. He seemed African but not as dark as most locals in this part, more like the people of the north who made their way to Arabia.

He spoke more English than most though his accent was different from the South African variant I had become used to in Botswana and Zimbabwe. There was also something in his demeanour that spoke military though outwardly he gave no sign, just a well-dressed and well-off dark skinned man who clearly had more money than most. He introduced himself politely as Felipe and I gave my name in return.

We fell to talking to pass the miles. I asked him about his accent and he told me he came from a village not too far from the Angolan coast, in a place to which the Portuguese traders had come many centuries before. He told of how a great grandfather had been a Portuguese man who had married a local girl. They had very many children of which his grandfather was one. So he had grown up with a mix of Portuguese, Afrikaans, English and his native language which had all got mixed up together.

He asked me where I came from. I told him about my homeland in the outback of Australia, how it was similar to look at to this land with its deserts, small hills,

open grass plains and bush thickets with acacias, except here the acacias had thorns big enough to take an eye out. I said Australia lacked most of African's big wild animals, the elephant, giraffe, rhinoceros, hippopotamus and kudu, to name a few, though the one thing it did have which was very similar was huge crocodiles.

He expressed interest in the crocodiles and told me his village had a river nearby. This had very large crocodiles which regularly ate village dogs, cattle, wild warthogs and antelope, and at times it would take a careless person. He told me how, if one went up to the river one very quietly, at odd times, they saw a very large crocodile which would sun its self on the side of a river pool.

I was fascinated and showed him my crocodile totem and told him about the ceremony when I was given my Baru totem by the people who guarded this spirit of the Dreamtime ancestors in my homeland.

He asked to see it better and I passed it to him to hold. He sat still with his eyes closed for a while, before opening them and saying, "I can feel a spirit in here, it is like one of my ancestor spirits, perhaps I had a crocodile ancestor too. It is like we share a bond with this crocodile ancestor from a time before he became a different animal in your land and mine.

I put my hand on top of his, both resting on the Baru. I could feel it too, an unbelievably ancient presence of a father of all crocodiles from which we and all crocodiles drew our lineage. In that moment we were bonded as two brothers of the same crocodile ancestor.

We rode the bus side by side for many hours and talked, ate and slept until at last we came to his land. Along the way he told me of his life. As I thought he was an army person. He was not in a regular army but instead was in a resistance army that was fighting to overthrow the communist government of his land. He was part of an organisation called UNITA for which he was one of its military commanders, with his own group of more than 100 resistance fighters who were striving to stop the area of their tribe from being taken over and made part of a communist state. I knew little of politics but the small amount I had seen of the communists in fighting in the Congo, where they were always trying to create trouble and where they had no rules to restrain their brutality, convinced me that his side was more in the right. Plus I hated oppression in any form where one side tried to impose on the freedoms of the other, so he had my sympathy on both counts. We also shared a brotherhood through this crocodile ancestor.

He told me he had just been to South Africa to arrange a shipment of arms to his people, to allow them to better defend themselves. There was a big push underway by the government forces to take over this area before the rains came. So he had arranged for a boat load of equipment to come to the coast within his land in a month's time in exchange for a return shipment of ivory taken from elephants shot by local hunters on their lands.

It was a last ditch effort, if they could not get better arms they would be overrun. Many would die and others would be forced from their lands.

In turn I told him about my life in a more complete way than I had told others. I knew he understood, he was used to fighting against those who sought to take that of his or his family's away. For him, if killing was needed to stop this, he was honour bound to do so.

I told him I was happy to help in his people's struggle if I could.

Rather than going as a visitor to the city he told me I should come with him to his place. So I went with him back to his village to meet his family and see the crocodile. A day later we came to his small home village, a place more prosperous than many I had been to. It had a lot of the children with a lighter skin, more the colour of dark honey than charcoal, showing a mixed African and Portuguese heritage.

Knowing I loved hunting, two days later he took me hunting. He had a bushman's skill of going through the forest silently without breaking a twig along with a trained person's familiarity with the gun he carried. I followed as silently as I could, carrying my own trusted weapon, my much loved 223 rifle. It came with me where I went, easily broken down and light to carry.

We sighted a small group of antelope feeding by the edge of the forest a few hundred metres away. They were too far away for an accurate shot, so we stalked slowly closer.

Felipe led, it was easy to see he was a master bushman, something about the way he blended into the landscape moved in an almost undetectable manner, much like a snake slithering through the bushes except that he went on two legs and sometimes all fours. His eyes were constantly on his prey, looking for a flick of an ear or a twitch of an eyebrow indicating some new alert. But there was nothing, no suggestion of anything untoward to disturb their grazing.

I followed as best I could, trying to emulate his movement and balance. I did a credible job, but it was a pale shadow of a master at work. Slowly we inched forward until little more than a hundred metres of separation remained. He signalled to me to take my aim and I prepared for my shot, finding a stable rest point for my gun against the shoulder of a tree. I selected and indicated my target, a big buck to the right of the group and he selected another large buck on the opposite side. His body mirrored my timing and movement as I took my shot, watching me to his side with half an eye while making his own selection. He gave me the go ahead symbol as he paused in his aim. Now I locked in on my own sight picture. A half second after the sound of my gunshot reverberated his own followed. Our two bucks lay dead at the feet of the others. They wheeled in fright and galloped into the forest.

We carried our bucks on our shoulders. They were heavy but within our strength. We talked of plans as we walked. These would provide a feast for the village, both to welcome me and to raise the spirit and give courage for the fight ahead. From tomorrow he must begin assembling and retraining his troupe of fighters, they knew their enemy would be attacking inside a month. He needed to hold the other side off until the arms arrived and gave them a real chance. For now their weapons were mostly old colonial bolt action rifles and their ammunition was low, no match for an army with machine guns.

I asked Felipe if we could see the crocodile before the fighting began.

He said it was near to the way home so we would go there now; it was the hot time of the day when it was most often out of the water.

I asked if he minded if I gave it a part of my buck to pay my respects.

We agreed it could have the head of my animal, less the horns which he would give to the village medicine man to create a magic of his own to help protect his tribe.

So we came to the river. We were weary from walking with our heavy load and sat down side by side under the shade of a big tree on its bank. A wide, deep looking pool lay before our feet, like the places of my homeland where a large crocodile would make its home.

Of this crocodile there was no sign so I took my totem from my pocket and held it in my hands, pointing its face to the water. I closed my eyes and joined my mind to its spirit which I felt restlessly stirring within. Together we pushed our spirits forward to the water. I realised another spirit had joined us. It was my brother, Felipe. Now our three spirits together reached out towards the water, probing far and deep.

In the deepest further depths we found it, resting in the darkest shade, behind a dead tree in the water, which we knew was its favourite hiding place. Together we all called, Come to meet with us. We have a gift for you.

And so it came and took our gift, talking mind to mind with us, telling us of this place in times long ago, when there were no people and only animals walked on this land. It told us its grandfather was one of these creatures, an spirit of an ancient dreamtime when animals ruled the land.

When the talking was finished it ate its gift and returned to its hiding place to sleep, satisfied with its meal. We in turn picked up our loads and walked through the hot afternoon sun until we came to our own village for our own feast.

Chapter 19

African War.

To call it a war is a misnomer. It was a massacre and it was all over in five minutes, at least our side's part in it was, though I then spent a couple hours squaring the ledger.

It was most important in the way it taught me more hard lessons about life, friendship, fickle trust and the sweetness of vengeance. But I am jumping forward and need to tell the story in order.

The second day after the feast we went to the bush camp for two weeks of serious training. There were about one hundred and twenty young men from our village and the surrounding villages which ringed this patch of jungle. The jungle ran from our river to another river perhaps 20 miles away. The coast was on one side and there were hills at the back, maybe thirty miles inland. This area was one of the last strongholds of resistance against the Angolan army and, because of its mix of swamps, jungle and hills with caves and other shelter, it had been a difficult area to subdue.

Foolishly we thought a few of us brave souls could stand tall against the might of a superior Soviet equipped force, with all the latest weapons direct from the USSR,

some still shiny in their factory grease. Perhaps we may have stood a chance but for treachery in our midst. However we were a thorn in the side of an almost victorious military and once we were gone there was nothing to stand in the way of their ultimate victory.

So they dealt with us in a way that sent shock waves through the other pockets of resistance and quickly brought an end—a cease fire they called it to save face. Really it was an unconditional surrender. Anyway I digress.

I went with Felipe into the jungle the second day after the feast. We walked thirty miles and came to a group of huts in a patch of cleared land where a handful of people eked out an existence growing corn and other crops in between hunting and harvesting the foods of the forest.

Some of us camped in huts, Felipe as Captain of this fighting force had one of which I took a corner for my sleeping mat. Three others slept in there alongside me as well. Others slept under tarps stretched between trees. It was the dry season, so shelter was more to protect us from the refuse of monkeys which lived in the trees and from the droppings of birds and bats. In a couple months the rains would come and anyone still here then would need real shelter from it, but would also be made safe by it. For now the weather was fine though hot and steamy.

The urgency came from the weather and the fact we knew the Angolan army was advancing on this jungle remnant to clean it out before the rains came and they could no longer get through it.

So we used it for shelter and training. Felipe had been trained in the regular army for a couple years before he deserted. He could see what was coming to those who stood in its way. He had a modern rifle and some other modern equipment, a crate of grenades, three mortars, two machine guns and a handful of other items. But most of the men had weapons of other times, old Lee Enfield 303s traded from former British colonies after they departed, some similar German second world war rifles, a few tourist hunting rifles and a selection of other assorted weapons. We were one step above the spear carrying Zulus of a century ago and another step above the bow and arrow jungle hunters, but these were not a big steps.

To stand a chance we desperately needed our new weapons. They were due in three weeks when the boat came to the mouth of the river, that had been the purpose of Felipe's trip—going to South African to make this last ditch transaction. But before these modern weapons reached us and we confronted our enemy we had to be taught how to use them. Two of our rifles and one machine gun was of the type that were coming, so we were broken into details and each detail practised on these weapons, everyone stripped and reassembled them several times and then we were each allocated five shots to learn a measure of accuracy in the shooting. I already had my 223 with which I was highly proficient and fifty of these were coming along with 200 heavy rifles of the similar semi-automatic type we had.

So I trained people in the use of my .223, running similar stripping and reassembly details. I only had enough ammunition to give each trainee a single shot but this was better than nothing. As well as armaments training we drilled in many other things, stalking, coordinated group movements, digging ditches and using terrain for simple protection, bush signals, hand to hand combat with knives

and machetes, and running and climbing to improve our fitness. We had an obstacle course with a mixture of trees, bog holes, barriers and rope climbs to navigate. Each day the fastest would get a prize, a small bag of lollies. It was a source of fierce contests. Once Felipe won and shared his prize with others in our hut, once I was second fastest which was a source of great personal pride though there was no prize. However, over the two weeks we trained there was a steady improvement in both our fitness and fighting power. By the time, two days before the boat arrival, that we assembled as a single force near our village, cautiously coming out of the forest in ones and twos, we were a formidable fighting team, not that it mattered in the end.

That night we were to meet with the general of our resistance army, to have motivational talk from him about our role in the future resistance and then tomorrow night our weapons would arrive.

Despite a level of caution, with sentries around our camp site which was half a kilometre from the village on the jungle fringe, there was a festive air, we were all confident that with new arms our fortunes would change, we would make a genuine fight of it and, as our resistance mounted, others would join in and we would drive back our enemy and take full control of our own lands.

I was as much caught in the fervour as any others; they were my family now too. In the same way that Felipe was my brother so his younger brother and sister were part of my family too, as were his father, mother and older sister with her own children who called me Uncle Mark.

We should have been more vigilant but treachery is ever thus.

There were whole pigs and an antelope roasting over cooking fires, there were vegetables being baked in large stone ovens and there were vats of a fermented alcoholic drink that many were consuming. It was a feast and celebration and also our last night before we thought we would be off to fight our enemy wherever they were. The night proceeded with feasting accompanied by singing of rousing military songs. An hour after dark a halt was called for our Captain and the General to address the assembling masses.

Felipe had just done his rousing Captain's speech and was introducing the General to the assembled crowd when two machine guns opened up, one shooting from either side of the gathering. We were used to the sound of weapons and the familiarity for a second removed the element of surprise, it was as if one of our own was shooting at some other target.

But in that instant Felipe collapsed, his chest and head blown apart by multiple rounds and a second later it was the General too. At the same time other soldiers and visitors were falling like flies. I was off to the side, partly in shadow and survived the first onslaught, flinging myself to the ground and crawling towards the shelter of a large tree trunk lying across the ground. As I lifted my arm to pull myself over it a bullet smashed into my forearm shattering the bone in the middle. In a second the place was swarming with soldiers, shooting or bayonetting any survivors. Then it was still and only I lived. I think they had seen my white skin and decided to hold off on finishing me off. Instead they grabbed me and tied me to a large tree from which I watched what followed.

A few seconds later one of our own emerged, one of the lieutenants smiling and self-congratulatory surrounded by Angolan Army soldiers. He eyed me off and,

knowing who I was, suggested I be left there alone for now to bear witness. In a few minutes other detachments of soldiers began to arrive, bringing with them all the other people from our village. They were herded into one group with a ring of rifles surrounding them. I saw Felipe's brother, sisters, mother and father amongst them, as well as many small children. The soldiers inspected the assembled group and began to pull out some of the young and attractive women and held them in a separate group, Felipe's two sisters amongst them. Then they took out three old men and tied them to other trees alongside me. When that was done, on the orders of their commander, with the nodding support of our former lieutenant, they opened fire on all the first group which still held the rest of Felipe's family. They died where they stood. Any who survived the first onslaught, mainly small children, were bayoneted or finished on the ground. Soon there was not a living breathing soul remaining, just a bunch of sobbing young women and girls. Then the soldiers set to and systematically raped and massacred all the women, taking a woman each between two or three men and when they had finished dispatching her with a knife or bullet as pleased them best.

It went on for a couple hours. When it was finished they released the old men and told them to go to nearby villages and tell of what they had seen with a warning that the same would be done to them if they sought to resist the Angolan Army. I was told later that the resistance rapidly crumbled.

For many hours they left me tied there. It was as if I was now forgotten, an item whose fate would be considered in the morning. When the killing was done they turned their attention to the food and drink and soon finished off what remained. Then, with bellies full of food and drink, they fell asleep in groups around the ebbing fires.

It was late when I awoke from an indeterminate sleep, tied in place still, my body slumping into the ropes, my smashed arm dangling limply and feeling on fire. Of guards there was no sign, of course there was no need as the wild animals had plenty to eat and there were none of the former soldiers to threaten them.

I had not been searched when first tied, probably on account of my damaged arm which was there for all to see as the blood had flowed from it. At the time I had used my other hand to squeeze down on the wound and so the blood loss had been only moderate and now it was just a slow dripping ooze. Now I realised I had a hunting knife strapped to my waist under my shirt, a standard precaution I had taken to carrying in my African travels. I had forgotten its existence until then.

It was difficult with only one good arm but I managed to get it free and set to cutting the ropes that held me, seeking to be quiet. Fortunately I was not close to where others slept and they slept soundly. At last it was done and I was free. I crept quietly into the jungle and made my way around the edge our camp and back towards the village to see if any remained here.

I did a careful scout around the village margins to check for soldier or sentries and found two places that seemed to have served as sentry posts until recently, with tramped ground, bits of cigarette ash, butts and other rubbish. However it appeared that the sentries had left their posts in the last hour or so.

As I drew close I heard the sound of singing and carousing, it seemed some of the soldiers had come back here, taken over some of the huts as temporary quarters, and were now having their own private party.

Amongst those in the circle of firelight, I saw our very own officer who had led the killing and one other from our group who I had not known about until now. They were both joining in the celebration.

As I looked at their flushed faces and thought back to what they had done, both the betrayal and the butchery, a hatred of them both filled my soul. I swore I would kill them both and kill them slowly if it was the last thing I did. Then I crept away.

Fortunately the hut in which Felipe and I had stayed was at the far end of the village and no one was in this part. I crept in quietly and found my things untouched, even my gleaming 223 semi-automatic was there hidden under my bed mat. I counted my ammunition and found I had two full clips, plus a few extra, about 45 rounds all told. One clip was of soft nose bullets. As I knew these would do maximum damage at close range I put this magazine in my gun and locked it into place.

I could feel the burning rage of a hunter at the butchery I had witnessed growing ever stronger. It was as if the crocodile spirit had taken possession of my soul and its only thought in this night was for revenge. But, alongside, sat my calculating brain, working coldly and methodically to make its plan for vengeance. First I needed to fix my arm as best I could and then I needed to know the strength of my opponents before I acted.

In my gear I had a first aid kit brought on from the Congo. It had several bandages, pain killing tablets, antibiotic tablets and wound powder. I dressed my smashed arm as best I could. Fortunately my hand seemed OK, all my fingers could move even though the pain was excruciating when they did. I found two straight sticks around my forearm length in the firewood pile, applied antibiotic powder to the oozing hole, padded my arm and bandaged it straight, using the sticks as splints, with my fingers out to help hold things.

I swallowed two mouthfuls of rum, took two tablets for the pain and two more to stop the infection, then packed the things I most needed and could carry in my backpack. I moved my pack to the base of a tree at the edge of the village, where I could quickly find it if needed.

With this done I set out to explore the enemy situation, my gun on its webbing strap resting over my bad side shoulder and my knife in my good hand. I checked the huts, one by one, but they were all empty.

All the village occupants I could recall, save the old men, had been butchered and there was none left here. As I came closer to the fire, where the party was in full swing, I heard snoring in one hut. Here I found three soldiers passed out on the floor and snoring loudly. They were in the uniform of the enemy. I jammed the hut door closed from the outside with a stick. I would attend to them later.

Then I crept towards the fire, using the bulk of a nearby hut to hide me. When I came to its door on the side I checked inside. There was some military gear; maps, rifles, radios and kit bags, but no occupants. I moved on, ever closer to the fire. There were seven men in a half circle around the fire, the two I knew and five others. Three of the others wore the uniforms of senior ranking officers and the other two looked like little more than teenagers, each had a rifle resting at their feet. As I watched for a while I thought it was most likely they were the sentries who had abandoned their posts

I chambered the first round in my gun, set the firing control to single shot and released the safety. It was time for some trick one arm shooting, using the techniques I have been taught some years before by Fred. It only worked well at close range so I would need to get within five metres of all the men. From that range I was confident I could put a killing bullet into each before they had time to move. Even though the rage was burning my mind was cold. I planned the order in which I would shoot for maximum effect as I crept forward.

They were all facing the fire and I was behind, so I calculated that I could get the first five in three seconds before they could turn around with a bullet in the back of the head of each. I would take out the two sentries first as they had guns close, then the three senior officers, as they were two or three steps away from their guns and so needed to be dispatched before they could react.

I expected that by then the last two, the traitors from our group, would be turning towards the noise, to see where the shooting was coming from, as they watched each of the others fall in rapid succession. As they turned towards me I would put a bullet into each one's guts, I wanted to immobilise them but not let them die too quickly. I had questions to ask them and also intended to use my knife on each before they died.

It happened exactly as I planned. I got to within three metres with none the wiser, my approach covered by their laughing over an unsavoury story. From here I could hardly miss the firelight silhouettes. A bullet went into the back of the head of each. I shot from shoulder height, using my shooting arm as my sight to aim, locking my sight picture on each dark head a split second before I released the trigger, time after time. In less than five seconds these five men lay dead on the ground. The last two were now turned my way, mounting terror on their faces. I lowered my aim to their mid bellies before I put a shot into each. Now they were both groaning and gasping on the ground. I picked up the two guns of the sentries, emptied the rounds and threw them in the fire.

Then I took a burning stick from the fire and went to the hut of those sleeping. I put it to the thatch roof. They could cook while I dealt with my fallen former friends. I felt no pity—they had shown none to my people of the village.

I returned to the two men lying on the ground, their eyes full of fear. I found some cord and crudely lashed each man's hands behind his back. I had three objectives, to get the truth from them as to why they had betrayed us, to make them suffer such that they experienced something of the terror they had inflicted on my village family, and a simple thirst for vengeance that I must fill, they deserved to be the recipients of a vengeance on behalf of a whole village, eye for eye and tooth for tooth. I could not inflict on them the rape that they had inflicted on others. But I would cut away the offending parts so they could never use them for this purpose again. Above all a part of my crocodile soul was clamouring for its own reward, to feast on its prey.

I knelt by the first man, knife in hand, speaking through gritted teeth in a mixture of words of the native dialect and broken English, "Tell me why, why did you betray your army brothers, those men you trained with and whose food you shared? And then why did you massacre all those in the village who had never done you any harm, they were your family too!"

The man tried to turn his head away, as if defiance might make him stronger. I looked across at his fellow traitor. Alongside the terror he had a strange sort of defiance in his eyes.

I put my knee on his chest and put the knife to his throat. He started to mouth in terror, "I will tell you, it was money."

I ignored him and looked to his friend saying, "He should have spoken sooner. Now I will show you what happens to those who do not answer straight away. His head will feed the crocodile in the river. I will cut it off and take it there." The man started to babble in terror.

I was unmoved, ignoring him and watching his fellow traitor.

"Watch this," I said.

The man thrashed his head below me as I started to cut. I could not cut cleanly with the movement of his head but no matter. As my knife bit in he screamed hideously. It was cut short on the second slice when I cut through his trachea and then the arteries, so blood sprayed into the air. Now his voice abated to a thrashing and gurgling sound. It too drained away as his life blood ceased to flow.

I continued to cut until I had separated his head from his neck, using my damaged hand to pull it apart as I cut with my good hand. When his head rolled free in my hand I stood up. I carried it two steps to where the living traitor lay. I asked, "Shall I kill you that way or will you tell what you know?"

He babbled out a stream of confessions of his own which I could only understand in part. It was the same stuff, money, the offer of power in a future government and the simple pleasure of taking by force one of the women of the village who had spurned him.

It seemed to me to be too little a justification for the murder of a whole village of his own people. As I stood over him pleading for his life, I felt as if Felipe was watching, along with my brother crocodile of the river, saying, "You do not need to kill him, just take from him his manhood."

I looked at this piteous creature grovelling before me and said. I will not kill you. I will just cut off your man parts and make you eat them. And so I did.

I left him there screaming as the blood flowed.

I took the head of the other man. I carried it to my other gear and then walked away from the village toward the river, listening to the distant screams of those in the burning hut as the fire burned bright behind me.

I felt anguish at the loss of all my friends, the good people of the village and at how they had suffered. Yet alongside this I felt a small satisfaction that came from how I had taken a small measure of their revenge that they could never take for themselves.

At the river I pulled the Baru from my pack and, with it in my damaged hand and the man's head in my good hand splashing the water, I summoned the crocodile, joining my mind to his. As a part of my mind reached out to him a part of his spirit came into me. I felt his pleasure as my own as he took the head from my hand and swallowed it down. Then I swam out across the river carrying my pack and he swam by my side, my crocodile brother.

At the other side bank we parted. I walked through the jungle for many days, nursing my smashed arm and cleaning it out daily until eventually the festering discharge ceased and it began to heal. I followed the forested land down to the

coast where I came up some fishing villages. Here I paid a local medicine man to dress and splint my arm better and then I paid a fishing boat to take me out into the ocean and bring me alongside a fishing trawler from a fleet operating out of Namibia. For another sum of money they took me on board and brought me to the fishing town base in Walvis Bay. Here the local hospital finished the cleaning and repair of my arm, setting it into a plaster cast for another two months until it healed straight. It took almost six months until it was strong enough to use again and the pain was minor.

I think my soul was more damaged than my arm. For several months I had haunting dreams of the missing people of that village who in a few short weeks had become the family I never knew. Felipe had been my brother and the rest of the village had been my wider family. In a few short minutes of a night they were all gone, just piles of flesh and bones to be scavenged by forest animals and to rot away under the relentless African sun.

Now it seemed like their only place of continuance was as disembodied spirits of dreams who sat their alongside my now twinned crocodile soul in a place beyond physical human existence where I could only know them when my eyes were closed and sleep overtook me.

The crocodile spirit had been my agent of vengeance and I was glad the vengeance had been given but yet this had no power to bring the banished souls back from this other half land.

Sometimes I wondered if my brotherhood with Felipe had made him careless and this had contributed to his people's demise. But I had no way of knowing this. Slowly as the weeks then months drifted by I knew I needed to rebuild my life back as my own solitary self.

Need for more money drove me to seek a job. While there were fishing jobs in Walvis Bay I had been reliably been told there were much better paid mining jobs in this new nation, Namibia's capital, Windhoek, working in the diamond mines. I had an excellent reference as a Botswana safari guide and using this and a new suit of clothes I made my way to the Mine's Windhoek headquarters and soon I was signed on in an internal security role within a large mine.

My first job was as part of an internal security team which patrolled the premises and checked those arriving and leaving the site. However I took an interest in the security systems and was soon brought into a team that would develop and deploy these across the business. I found I had an aptitude for understanding these electronic systems. Soon I was responsible for deploying and maintaining these in a range of high security sites.

As I rapidly became a bit of a computer geek I found myself being talked to at an adult level by others with this interest and also by those who had custody of the items we were protecting. Key places to be protected were the diamond sorting rooms where the risk was always there that stones be taken by the workers.

So, as part of setting up systems, I found myself being shown a wide range of fabulous stones. Being naturally interested in their beauty and value I soon started to learn the key aspects of grading diamonds and where their value lay. It was rapidly obvious to me that those who could successfully take a stone or two unnoticed could become wealthy overnight. Not that I had a desire to take any, my

loyalty was with the company which had given me my job, but the potential was easy to see.

Chapter 20

African Girl.

They say *where the money is the flies gather*. So it is with diamond mines.

Most of the people who worked in the mines, whether in the extraction underground, or in the sorting and grading rooms above, were poor African workers. But still a day's wages here was vastly in excess of anything to be earned in other parts of the country.

So surrounding the mine and its workers was a second economy; those supplying services. There were the obvious ones like those who delivered fuel, food, equipment and other supplies, and there were the less obvious ones like those who provided services to the workers, laundry, hot food, accommodation and of course for the mostly male underground workers there were the girls who serviced them two, with their prices reflecting a mix of quality and desperation.

Some were local girls from surrounding towns, but most came from other adjoining poor countries or poor areas; South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Angola, Zambia, and places further afield. Alongside the girls were a range of middle men and madams who all took their cut, the pimps, brothel owners, the list went on and on.

Gradually I learned who all these people were and the roles they played in the mine supply economy. As much as possible I kept out of their way and left them alone though more than a few times I was tempted and sometimes succumbed to the charms of one of the lovelies. I knew, like most, that one needed protection. Aids was rampant within the working girls and for some men it was a badge of honour to have unprotected sex.

I had been working in my job a few months when a diamond merchant I knew slightly, who operated at the fringe of the mine business, approached me through an intermediary to meet him at a local bar for a conversation. His name was Pieter van der Kamp. He was of Afrikaans background, speaking English with a thick accent. All I knew at this stage was that he served as an intermediary in lots of diamond purchases.

Around the margins of the mine lots of gems of dubious provenance were traded, some came from the four main mines around the town and some from other small scale operations. The mines had to live with this grey market. Provided all ended up in the De Beers consortium for international sales a certain amount of internal trading was tolerated, though it was made as hard as possible for mine gems to leak through their rigorous security, backed thuggish enforcers when people were caught breaking the rules.

I thought perhaps Pieter wanted to discuss some sensitive security information about a competitor who was not playing by the generally agreed rules; there were

two of these I could think of, whereas my impression of Pieter was he generally seemed pretty straight.

On arriving at the bar I was led to a secluded private booth at the back. A large glass of lager was placed in my hand. Pieter held out his hand to shake as I sat opposite. I offered my hand back and nodded politely.

I waited and within a few seconds he opened up, "I have been hearing good things about you, both about your security work and your business smarts from those I know," he said.

I raised an eyebrow waiting for him to continue, which he did, "I need an offsider, someone who is both good at managing the risks in this dangerous business and has an eye for a good gem. It also needs to be someone free and willing to travel as needs must.

I put up a hand to stop him, "But I already have a job at the mine and they have been good to me. Plus I am sure you know my knowledge of gems is very limited. Sure I have looked at some stones in the sorting rooms and talked to a few of those who grade and sell. But that is all."

Pieter smiled and said, "I would have been disappointed if you had jumped at my interest. I am not looking for an expert, just someone I can teach. Much more important is the ability to stay safe, to defend yourself if you must, but mostly not to get into dangerous situations and make use protection when required.

"Assessing gems is something I can teach, whereas staying alive requires a special mix of smarts, native cunning, an eye for danger and a willingness to play hard when needed. That's what I see in you. While you are young and not highly experienced you are not easily frightened. It is obvious you do not run from danger and are a survivor.

"The nurse in the hospital told me it was a bullet wound that you got in Angola. The word is about out there of a white man who escaped from the fighting there leaving a trail of bodies behind despite being shot in the arm. It is said he went by the name of Mark Bennet. So I find it passing strange that someone with those injuries and that name turned up here a few weeks later having come to the coast on a fishing boat."

I must have looked a bit alarmed that the dots had been joined, but he patted me on the arm and said, "It is amazing how money buys intelligence in this country. As far as I know I am the only one who knows. Still it is time for you to get a new name and move to a place where you are not known as Mark Bennet. That is where my offer comes in.

"I operate in South Africa and here. As my wife and children live here this is where I prefer to be. But over half my business comes out of South African; the diamond business is mostly around Kimberley though I also deal in gold in the Witwatersrand out of Johannesburg. So I need someone to represent my interests in that country and it is there you would be based."

And so it was—he reached an accommodation with my employer who said they were sad to let me go but understood that a better offer in South Africa had been made.

I was provided with a small flat in Kimberley, a car to drive around in and a generous wage as well as expenses. Pieter said that for the first month he would travel with me teaching me the tricks of the trade then he would come down for a

week each month until he was sure I understood my job and the value of the diamonds and other valuables. My job was to use his contact network to purchase gems from those at the edge of the legal industry which he would then on-sell to the big companies, at a substantial profit of course.

He also traded in gold from the minor miners, buying and on-selling to jewellers to make into jewellery, with minimal money to the government who wanted a cut. Here the profit margin was less as all knew the value of gold by weight. But still as a middleman with tax savings there was a good living to be made.

The biggest threat was robbery. When I had valuables in my possession I always travelled with at least one armed guard, though as much as possible it was done in a low key manner, having meetings in non-descript places that roused little interest. And of course I carried a knife and a loaded pistol to discourage unwanted attention though I never had to use it. Pieter had put the word around that I was an ex mercenary who had got rid of a few people and this seemed to keep the minor louts away.

I found I enjoyed the travel around the south of Africa with a purpose. Pieter was a wealth of knowledge and an honourable man even though he skirted around the edge of the law. He taught me how to quickly appraise gemstones, mainly diamonds though it was amazing what else also turned up for discreet sale. He generally avoided stones set in jewellery as there was a high likelihood these were stolen and also traceable.

He also tried to pay fair prices while keeping his profit margin, as many black people selling had little idea of true worth. It was also good business as people did not feel cheated or hold a grudge later. As a result past customers would often warn of others who might cause trouble. They were also often repeat customers.

By the end of the month I had a string of discreet meeting places and travelling routes mapped out for the next month, a security guard, Moses, arranged to come with me. He was fluent in local languages and could act as an interpreter if required. Most of all I had the confidence and trust of Pieter which I returned equally.

At the end of the month I returned to Windhoek with him and stayed in his family home for a week. He showed me more of his business operations there, his gem grading, cleaning and polishing facilities, and he introduced me to his business contacts in the big diamond companies to which he on-sold most product. We shared war stories; he too had been a mercenary and then a policeman before he started this business. He had found some of the brutal and discriminatory parts of the police business offended him.

Then he had met an African woman who he adored. Soon he had three brown skinned children with her, all of which pushed him to go his own way. He put me up in his own house in the city and his whole family was a delight, the children treated me as an uncle or older brother and his wife sensed my loyalty to Pieter and treated me as a good friend. I found myself sad to return to my solitary life when the week was over, but was determined to do the best for his interests in South Africa.

I settled into this work and struck up an easy and casual friendship with Moses who had his own house and family in Kimberley. He too had been a police man, teaching him security and weapons handling, and he had been educated in a

mission school giving him the English fluency. So for most of each month we travelled and bought gold and gems. At the end of the month Pieter would come for a few days, meet his most valued customers and take home what I had acquired in the last month.

I was starting to build up my own contact networks leading to a steady growth in the business. Some of the big townships were a bit scary to deal in but Moses knew ways to negotiate these safely. He had his contacts in these towns to pay off in return for getting their protection. It was a small cost in the scheme of things.

The one place I found hard to deal with was the Witwatersrand.

It was a place which had earned fabulous wealth for the country over more than a century. It was said that more than half the gold in the world today had come out of this locality and its cluster of gold mines. However it was a barren and desolate place despite the wealth. The mines were some of the deepest in the world. Most of the business owners were hard men and their workers were little more than slaves working in awful underground conditions. Relative to other African wages their wages were good and so there was always a plentiful supply of labour despite the awfulness.

A mushroom of towns and other living places, many little more than hovels, had sprung up in this area. As well as a legal economy there was a huge black market economy where almost anything was bought and sold.

It is always thus with money and exploitation, becoming a honeypot for low life, corruption and the rest of it, drugs, drinking, prostitution and more.

I was no prude but found something innately distasteful about the way these people lived. The white owners were bad enough but at the next level was a whole class of black, white and mixed race parasites that fed off this cesspool. And yet the desperation of feeding one's family kept new people coming to start whole new cycles of abuse.

The system which Pieter had set up was to spend a week of each month in Kimberley and surrounds, a week of each month travelling by a circuitous route to Witwatersrand meeting and making purchases along the way, a week there at the edge of this slime-pool buying the gold and gems that needed to be traded and then another week of circuitous travel on my way home. He had arranged for me to stay in a discreet boarding house when in Witwatersrand. It had some private meeting rooms for dealing, though we also went out to meet clients in other safe locations. So while I did not feel directly threatened and the services of Moses and the locals kept me safe, the vice was all around me.

I found the ongoing brutality and bullying nature of the life was always troubling to my soul. Perhaps it was too close to my own early experience though it brought me to realise that, all things considered, I had not been treated too badly, compared to what went on here.

In keeping with Pieter's instructions I kept a low profile and ignored the violence around. It was not up to me to be the saviour of others, but still it galled my soul to see this unchecked brutality which was covered by a veneer of everyday normality.

There were many working girls in this town but Pieter had warned me to stay away from them as many had diseases which could be passed on, Aids, hepatitis, tuberculosis, other venereal diseases, to name a few. Instead he and Moses had

introduced me to some clean and discreet working girls in other places should I want this service and from time to time I used it.

There was a brothel next to the boarding house where I stayed when here. Each day, in the early morning sunshine, I would see one or two of the girls sitting outside. They would laugh, mock me gently and offer services of the night. It was good natured banter and a couple of them were truly lovely to look at and talk to, even though I resisted their other offers.

When I came back for my second week in Witwatersrand it started to feel like these girls were old friends, they greeted me as someone they knew and even offered cut price rates, part in jest though business was business.

However in the early mornings while the pimps slept they had freedom, with an almost playful demeanour. For these brief hours they lived lives of apparent carefree joy in the sunshine before their day's work begun.

One girl in particular had struck up a friendship with me. She was from Mozambique, her name was Alima and, as another educated through the mission system, her English was good. She was a bit older than some, perhaps early twenties. She was truly lovely to look at, dark hair in ringlets with flashes of sun touched lighter highlights, proud high cheekbones and a lovely oval face. Even though tallish, she was lighter in build than most, slim but yet well rounded. It was obvious that she was a top class girl but there was also something open and delightful in her demeanour, less sullen and worn down than some of the others.

The first week I was there she just flashed me a smile the few times that I saw her. I was tempted to book her services but remembered the warning to keep clear of the girls in this place. It was not just the risk of disease, it was also that it seemed best not to draw unwanted attention to myself. I limited myself with a smile and a small wave of the hand.

The second time I came there was no sign of her on the day I arrived but early the next morning, I went out for a walk in the neighbourhood. As I returned she was there with a friend, a hot drink in both their hands. That seemed like a good point of introduction to ask the best place to buy one of my own which I did. Then the three of us sat chatting on the low wall that separated our buildings while we drunk our drinks. It was here I gathered the first scraps of history of these two, both from Mozambique. Her friend was plumper with an open friendly face and good to look at but not in the class of Alima.

The next morning I was back a little earlier and bought a coffee for me and a hot chocolate for each of them which was their preferred drink. They emerged just as I was coming back with the drinks and both smiled with delight at my offering. As we went our ways on that day, she whispered to me. Please do not buy me one tomorrow. My man, who looks after me, gets very jealous and hits me if he thinks I am becoming too friendly to others.

I did not see either of the next two days but on the day before I left she was there on her own. We had ten minutes to converse before she said she must go. On the last day I saw her briefly and noticed she had a swollen face on one side. I wanted to ask her but she silenced me with a hand signal, clear she did not want to go there. But she gave me a happy smile when I said I would be back again in another month.

I found myself looking forward to my return the next month, even if the simmering violence just below the surface of the Witwatersrand made my work harder than in other places.

This time I did not see her for two days. On the third day she was there with a bloodshot eye on the other side. Again she would not talk about it that day and her demeanour was full of anxiety. But the next day she was much more relaxed and we spent half an hour have a deep conversation. She told me that the man who protected her had gone away for two days. So today and tomorrow she would be safe from him and he would not beat her. When I asked her more she explained that he got paid more for her when she went with men without protection and so he would force her to do this dangerous thing which she did not want. It was not with everyone but it was with some rich clients who thought it unmanly to use protection. So, if she tried to say no he would take her out and hit her, normally on the body, but sometimes when most enraged he hit her on the face too and, in the end, she would have no choice to accede to his wishes. As she described how he had beaten her the day before I had returned I could feel anger build inside me. I knew I should not get involved and yet. She told me it was a secret between us and I must tell no one of her confidence.

Reluctantly I agreed. However each time I thought of her being hit and forced to have unprotected sex I could feel anger rise again inside me. My mind told me I was but one man and that I could not fight against a country full of brutality. But each time I thought of her, which was often, I felt this anger rise again.

Next morning she was there waiting when I came out, she held two steaming hot drinks, having bought one for me. I accepted it with pleasure and for another half hour we spent a time of delight, just talking, before we reluctantly went our separate ways.

The next was my final day before we left. I did not see her in her usual early morning place. However, as I was carrying my things out to the car, I heard shouting and screaming coming from the back of that house. My sixth sense told me it was her screaming, she was not calling out for help but was screaming in a mixture of anger and pain.

I made my way along the narrow gap between the two houses. In the back yard of their place I saw them both. He had her hair in one hand and held a stick in the other which he was using to hit her around the body. She was like a tiger fighting and clawing to escape, while hurling abuse at him in her own language.

As I saw what was happening something snapped inside me. He was a big man, perhaps two inches taller than me and much heavier though with a bloated face from too much eating and drinking and an expanding waist from the good life. I did not have my gun with me but had a knife strapped to my side, though I decided I would leave it there and warn him off. I felt sure I could deal with him easily enough on a one on one basis.

So I walked up behind his turned away body. I took a similar lump of his hair in my hand as he had of hers. As I grasped it I reeled it sideways to throw him off balance. As he fell I kicked him in the kidneys for good measure.

He let out a howl of rage and came for me with a knife in his hand, eyes like daggers and bellowing murderous threats. He was faster and stronger than I thought, and knew exactly how to use a knife. I realised I was in serious trouble if

I let him close. I had not time to get my own weapon to balance the score. In the last split second I dodged the blade and gave him a two handed chop to the neck as he passed. It should have been enough to take down most men but in a flash he rebounded and was back at me again, muttering expletives as he waved his knife at my belly.

I knew I was millimetres away from being disembowelled; the knife was long and very sharp and would slice straight through if it connected. In the last second I went to fling myself sideways, needing to get behind him and get my own knife out to even the score. But my foot found a patch of loose dirt and my leg went out. I crashed to the ground with him on top, feeling the blade slice through the back of my shoulder. It was only a glancing slash but still it cut in a shallow arc through my shirt and skin. He had the weight and surprising speed and strength for such a big man, despite starting to turn to flab. I knew I was in trouble, having lost control of the situation. My arms were pinned under his body. I tried to get a knee free, to drive into his groin or to push him away. But he had his body wedged between my spreadeagled legs. I watched his knife hand swing in a new curve, heading for my chest from the side. With all my leg strength I pushed my body into, lifting myself upwards, pushing him with me. It was just enough to get the blade to miss my side. Instead it sliced into my back and shoulder again, deeper this time.

I felt the cut, but with the adrenalin rush, the pain was but a burning flash. In the half second before he could move his knife hand again I rolled to face it grasping with both hands. Now he had me from behind and could bring both his hands to bear pushing the blade in towards my chest. I had both hands to push back but he was stronger and I had also lost strength with the cuts to my back. I knew this was a fight I was going to lose and it would end badly.

My mind searched for a new trick to get the advantage back, but I could see no way out. Inexorably the knife point came towards me. I had pushed it down slightly and it was now aiming for my belly just below my ribs, but that was no real improvement. I knew I had a bare second before he would win and tensed myself for a final effort to resist and fling myself sideways, in the hope that I could escape his grasp and regain my feet in a single movement, though I was almost sure it was a futile hope. In that last split second there was a crunching crack and he slumped forward.

I looked up to see Alima standing over us both, holding an orange sized rock she had smashed into his head. I pushed him off me, pulled the knife from his hand and we both looked at each other and then at him. He was out for the count, perhaps he would survive though I thought it unlikely as it sounded like the bone in his skull had been smashed. I could have checked or called for help but it was past time for that.

I looked up and realised that two of the girls were watching from a back window and had seen what happened. I figured at most it would be a minute or two until others arrived, there were at least two other big bouncers in the brothel who could not be far away.

I could feel blood trickling down my back but there was no time for that now. I took Alima by the hand and brought her to the street where my car was parked. Fortunately my own guard, Moses, was not in sight and I had the keys in my

pocket. So as quickly and unobtrusively as possible we got in and drove away. After a couple minutes we were several streets away with no one following. I pulled to the side of a quiet street and asked Alima to have a look at my back. She took a shirt from the seat pressed it into the two cuts until the bleeding slowed to a trickle. Then she found bandages in the first aid kit and strapped dressings over the cuts. With that done we drove out of the town heading north.

It is hard to describe how instant love can be. From that time we were bonded. We had barely spoken a word to each other since it began, just the barest communication. Despite the pain in my back I felt a surge of elation and started to laugh. I looked at her and she grinned too and then we were both laughing, as much in relief as anything else before.

I had never had anyone save my life before. It felt strange and wonderful that it had happened at the hands of this beautiful girl.

As our laughter subsided I took her hands and said, "Thank you, you saved my life just then."

She replied, "You saved me first. It would not have happened if you had not come to help. I knew when I saw you that I could not let him badly hurt or kill you which is what he would have done."

She touched her hands to my face as if it was precious. I in return put my hands on hers and then pulled her face to mine. We touched lips and noses.

Now our conversation turned to serious matters. I said, "Where do you think we should go?"

With no hesitation she replied, "We should return to my home village in Mozambique. We will be safe there until you recover from your injuries!"

I knew we must leave South Africa, if the man died Alima would be charged with his murder based on what the witnesses had seen. And if he survived there would be a big price to pay. I had several thousand rand in cash with me along with diamonds, other gems and gold worth many tens of thousands of rand more. I did not want to steal them from Pieter but knew in the short term they would help buy our way out of trouble until I could find some way to return what I did not need to him and in time repay the rest.

And so it was. I used the roads that Pieter had shown me to head north east skirting around Johannesburg and Pretoria and then heading towards Kruger National Park. Half way there Alima used a girlfriend in the game for a place to stay that night. Together they cleaned and redressed my cuts. She told her friend what had happened and she in turn she understood that we needed not to be known off in these parts.

We slept, bodies pressed together in a narrow wire bed. It was not sexual but it was immensely comforting to feel her arms around me in the night. I knew the other would come in its own time.

Her friend arranged another old but reliable car for us to drive on from there, lest the police be checking for my car description or number plates. In return she agreed to sell mine for whatever she could get on the black market. I told her that whatever money it made was hers to keep.

Next day we reached Kruger. I reverted to my former identity as Mark Bennet with my old passport to match, having taken the name of Mark Butler in South Africa. Once in Kruger we played the role of a visiting Australian tourist travelling

with a local girl who had arranged a local car. That night, for a price of two thousand rand each we crossed into Mozambique via Kruger National Park. There were no papers or customs forms completed to mark our passage, just a visa stamp in my passport to show I was a legal visitor.

We crossed into the adjoining Limpopo National Park, a similarly huge National Park in Mozambique which shadowed Kruger on its joint border. I knew this part of Africa from my time working in the Okavango in Botswana. Several times I had come to these parks to collect guests and bring them to our resort and at times I had accompanied guests who had gone on from our resort and wanted a personalised tour through these parks which I had done jointly with a local ranger. So I was known here under my old identity and was confident that, after this time, any search for me outside of Angola would have faded away. I hid the pain from the wounds in my back, lest questions be asked, as we passed through. We then drove on to Alima home. Even though no one questioned what I was doing on my return here I decided that, once we had settled in Mozambique, I would get new identity documents under another MB name.

For three weeks we stayed in the small home village of Alima until my back was almost healed, two fresh red scars coursing across my shoulder and mid back as a testament to how close the knife had come. Then we travelled to Maputo to arrange my identity papers and for me to ring Pieter and let him know what had happened. As I still had all his gems and gold and three quarters of his money I wanted to arrange to send this on to him.

By now Alima and I were effectively a married couple, at night lovers and in the day friends. We decided we would tell those we met we were married as it simplified explanations and in practical terms it was true even though no ceremony had been held. I had no doubt I wanted to spend my life with this woman and it seemed she felt the same about me.

I had no secrets from her, I had told her of my actions in Angola and before and she understood, life was cheap here and vengeance was an everyday part. She said if it had been her in my place she would have hoped to do the same to those who betrayed my friend Felipe's village in that land.

When I got on to Pieter he expressed total delight in my safety and said he had been awaiting a call. He said, he had known I was a survivor and was sure I would turn up shortly once I got clear of the trouble. As suspected the bouncer had died and there was an arrest warrant out for us both in relation to his death across South Africa so, for now, it was better to be far away.

He even suggested that if it was OK with me I could continue to work for him in Mozambique. He had business of a similar type but smaller scale here.

The week and then months went by. We rented a house in Maputo and lived as a couple. Within a couple months Alima was expecting our first child.

I was indescribably delighted. I had never thought of myself as a father, but somehow with her it seemed natural and normal. I could not wait to see our brown skinned child. I felt I could imagine him or her perfectly as a little replica of Pieter's children.

Chapter 21

Loss.

It was soon after this time I began to notice that all was not well with Alima. Since I had known her she had a low grade cough from time to time, she told me it came from all the dust around where she had lived in South Africa. However it seemed to be getting steadily worse and she was also getting tired which I attributed to her pregnancy. But now it was more severe and rather than gaining weight with her pregnancy and the good food we were eating she was getting thinner.

A month went by with her reluctant to seek treatment. It was obviously not improving so one day I collected her and drove her to the local doctor despite her protests. I suspected nothing serious, but thought maybe some antibiotics and vitamins would be the pick-up she needed.

The doctor examined her carefully with obvious concern and took blood for routine tests. He also arranged chest Xrays for the next day. On the third day we returned for the results, suspecting nothing, at least that was how it was for me.

The doctor sat us down and put the X-rays on a table between us. His manner was nervous and diffident and he looked at me rather than Alima as he said. "I am afraid I have extremely bad news. Your wife has very advanced tuberculosis and very advanced AIDS."

It felt like being hit with a sledge hammer in the guts, it took my mind a while to process the details of the words. Alima sat there, her face inscrutable. I did not know what she was thinking, but she showed no evident surprise. I wondered if perhaps she already knew something or had an idea of what was coming. Of course, as a former prostitute, she knew about these things.

The X-rays showed multiple white things in her lungs, they had obviously been there for some time and now were spreading actively, with small ones along with the big ones. The blood results were both strongly positive for the HIV test and showed an extremely low lymphocyte count, though her other white cells were elevated as they tried to fight off the infection.

It seemed to me, considering how bad the results indicated things were, Alima was surprisingly calm. The doctor recommended initial anti-tuberculous drugs and a low dose of an anti-aids drug that was considered less harmful for a developing baby than some drugs. It would take a while for sensitivity testing of the TB strain to work out what drug combination would work best for it. In the meantime the disease was too advanced to wait, he said.

It was when he talked about the AIDS that Alima paid attention and finally said something. "Doctor, I need to understand about whether these drugs will harm my baby. I do not want to harm my baby in any way. That is the most important thing. She was amazingly knowledgeable about the different drugs, both the anti-tuberculous ones and the AIDs ones, along with their risks and side effects, knowing far more than me, it emerged.

That night as we lay into bed and talked I began to understand. She had had tuberculosis since a child and initially it had responded well to treatment, appearing to have gone away.

But then, three years ago, she had come to South Africa on the promise of a good job where she could send some money home to her mother to help in the cost of raising and educating her younger brother and sister. Instead she had found that the job offer was working as a prostitute. While reluctant she had no money to return home and did not want to admit she had failed her family. So she took it, thinking it would only be a temporary thing until something better came along.

Her pimp was a thug and a bully who raped her regularly just to brutalise her. About a year after starting work there she was forced by her pimp into having unprotected sex with an obviously sick man for which she was paid a small amount extra and he was paid a very large sum. It seemed this sick man had a belief that having unprotected sex with healthy girls would prolong his own life. He was willing to pay very large sums of money for this.

When she refused to agree to going with this man her pimp had violently raped her and in the end of that ordeal while she was lying hurt and bleeding on the bed, he brought in this man who had paid the money, while he stood guard outside the door.

So she had been forced to let this sick man have his way when she no longer had the strength to fight him off. A few months later she had got the first sickness and the AIDS test was positive so she knew it came from him.

She had gone on anti-retroviral drugs to control the AIDS but the TB had started to spread and become drug resistant. The anti-retroviral drugs were working to a fair extent so she did not appear sick, though she easily got other infections needing antibiotics. She knew she must continue working to send money home until her brother and sister were educated.

She had known from then it was a one way trip but she had continued to fight against being forced to have unprotected sex with clients, even though it was too late for her. She had hidden her HIV and tuberculosis status from the brothel and the pimp, part hoping that he would catch them too and also not wanting to lose her work.

And, for the time up until I had met her, this treatment had seemed to keep the sickness under control, she had become a bit thin but if anything it helped her get business. She had not liked the drugs, they caused nausea and other side effects, but they seemed to work with her rarely getting seriously sick, passing her odd bad days off as typical women problem days.

But when she had come away with me the tablets had got forgotten and she decided she did not want to go back to the way they had made her feel before, the low grade nausea and other symptoms.

Of course she knew it was dangerous and soon she realised she was slowly getting worse but somehow she hoped for a miracle, she felt my rescue of her from this awful place was its own miracle and hoped against hope that the diseases would go away and she would live happily ever after with me. But it was not meant to be.

She said she had not meant to fall in love with me; it was an impossible situation and yet she was powerless to stop it. Then, when were together, she was

powerless to stop herself becoming my lover. She hoped she had not passed this sickness on to me. To protect me she used a herb which, she was told by a nurse who cared for the brothel girls, was supposed to make it unlikely she would pass her infection on. Becoming pregnant had come as a surprise. It had never happened before despite the many times she had been made to do it without protection. When it happened she had decided the baby came first, she would not take medicines that might harm it, particularly the strong anti-aids drugs. She felt this baby was a blessing from God, giving the chance for her life to continue into another person. She was determined to do the best by this child of ours.

I marvelled at her strength of character, accepting for herself a death sentence to give her child the best chance even though it would surely end badly for her. I understood but it still tore at me just as badly, knowing how this would most likely end.

I loved this woman with my heart and soul. She was giving me a child and yet I was asked to let her sacrifice herself for it. I could even understand why she had not told me until now; she did not want to shatter our idyll. And now her decision to come home made more sense too, she had come home to die in her home village under her mother's care, and to ensure that her baby had someone else to care for it after she was gone.

I had been happy before to be here with her in Maputo. But at times I wondered at her resistance to going to other places with me. I had asked several times that she come on trips with me, to Botswana, to Kenya, to Namibia. Each time she said I should go and she would stay with her mother. Now it made its own sense.

She told me she expected to have just enough time for our baby to be born and survive, another six months or so. She did not know whether it would be the TB or AIDs that killed her or some other evil disease thing that travelled in its footsteps. So she had decided she would take just enough drugs to survive until the baby was born. Then, if she was still well enough, she could increase the doses and try and buy a few months more of life.

* * * * *

And so it was. We returned then to the village to live. I let my other work go. Instead I struck an agreement with Pieter that, if he would advance me all the money I needed for her care and the best medical treatment for now, then I would work for him as hard as I could to pay it all back once the child was born and she either recovered on high doses of the drugs or died.

Each month we would go to Maputo for the best treatment that money could buy. The rest of the time we lived quietly in her village. The baby grew larger and she grew sicker, month by month. Her mother made her favourite foods of her childhood to help her appetite and feed both her and the baby.

Her mother and I became close friends and allies in her care. We would both be positive and pretend Alima was doing well, even though it clearly was not so. But it seemed to work and keep her spirits up and mine as well, as if this pretence could hold back the tide of time even though she was clearly fading away before our very eyes. By six months she could barely walk, she would lean on me, heavily, the little of her there was. Often I would pick her up and carry her, as if a

child, as we went out to take in the fresh air and the sights of the village and its surrounds.

At our seven month visit to Maputo the baby was pronounced large enough to survive if it came early. I tried to talk her into having a Caesarean but she would not hear of it. At eight months she was sicker and now the doctors told her it was no longer a choice, the baby had to come out to save its own life as she was too sick to give our baby the nutrition from her body that it needed.

So the operation was done and I stood there marvelling at this wonderful and perfectly formed child which was a half of me and a half of her. I loved the child but it was so bitter sweet, a beautiful baby which she looked at with rapturous eyes but I knew it had finished her.

They started her on the higher doses she needed but it was clearly too late, her immunity was shot to bits, the TB was rampant and she was beyond saving. So I took them both home from the hospital to her village to wait for her to die.

She made it for two more months, sometimes she seemed to be rallying, but it was illusory hope, the diseases working together had won the battle already and it was now just a matter of time.

A week before she died she rallied for a last time and we arranged a simple village marriage ceremony, along with a naming ceremony for our child. She wanted him to have my name, Marco that she called me, as well as that of her missionary English teacher, named Nathaniel, a good man who she hoped our son would take after with both his kindness and learning.

That night I made love to my beloved Alima for the last time, holding her precious wasted body to me. She told me that, despite all the pain and suffering at the end, these last few months had been far and away the happiest time of her life as it had been too for me.

A week later we buried her. I no longer could find any tears to cry but I held our child, a lusty boy who bawled loudly. I showed him his mother for the last time before we lowered her into the ground and covered her. And then I left the child with its grandmother and travelled off to repay my debt to Pieter.

Each month for six months until the debt was paid I came back to the village to give her mother money and see my child. He was healthy and thriving. The nurses and doctors had tested him and confirmed he was free of the diseases which killed her. It gave me joy to see him but at the same time was a rush of pure pain as I thought of the price which came with his life.

Chapter 22

Return to the Outback.

I had managed this strange half-life with my child and his grandmother for six months when I knew I could not keep it going.

Each visit was such an excruciating mix of joy and pain that it felt my life was stuck in a whirl pool and unable to move on. I needed time and more separation to bring solace to my soul.

So one day I caught a Qantas flight from Harare through Johannesburg which brought me home to Perth, Australia. It was a baking hot summer day and the desert wind was blowing its heat and dryness as I stepped from the plane. I bought an old Holden utility with most of my remaining money and headed for the Outback, just me with my swag thrown on the vehicle back, seeking something, I knew not what.

I picked the odd day's work as I drove north through the outback of Western Australia, just enough to put fuel in my car and buy a bit of food on the way. My trip was aimless, I have no formed idea of a destination, I just knew I needed space around me, lots and lots of it. And out here was plenty, miles on endless miles. But each time I stopped for more than a day or two a restless feeling would return. In truth I think I was searching for an imaginary place over the horizon that did not exist. It was never there when I reached it and so I continued on, town by town and place by place, most of them empty save for scrubby trees, rocks, sand and a few birds which screeched.

I found myself in Marble Bar for a week and helped tear down a shed in the town, then I was in Fitzroy Crossing where I did some fencing on a station near there for a bit. Then it was Halls Creek where I thought of looking for more work, but in the end just bought petrol.

From here I could choose to go north to the Kimberley or across east to the stations of the Northern Territory out in the Victoria River Downs District. This was the home of my favourite NT stations, and going on from there the road led to Katherine and Darwin. There was a third choice, a road less travelled which took me south east through the Tanami to Alice Springs.

I was not sure if my car was up to this trip, several hundred miles of rough dirt roads where no one lived. The engine was already blowing some smoke and would need major work soon for which I had no money. This was an empty road, particularly in the heat of summer when days were mostly somewhere between forty and fifty degrees Centigrade, that is in the shade. In the baking sun you could add another ten on to that. So it was a bad place to be broken down in the full summer.

Caution said another way was better but desert and solitude was what I craved. So I filled a spare jerry can with petrol and another with water, got a couple packets of biscuits and headed out.

The first two hundred miles was done that day with no major problems, only an ever smokier exhaust spewing a black fog into blasting heat. As the dark settled in I sighted a small rise and pulled off the track. I unrolled my swag out on a scrubby sand ridge, just me and an untold odd billion stars for company. My food was a few dry biscuits with mouthfuls of warm water.

Next day I pushed on. I had not sighted a car since yesterday, an hour out of Halls Creek. By late morning the temperature was sizzling. My car had no thermometer but I guessed from the hot wind blowing through the cabin that it was forty five degrees by eleven. Outside where shimmering heat reflected off the baked earth of a scrubby track it was probably well on the upside of fifty.

Somewhere around lunch time, a time when I started looking for a shady tree to take a break under, with no more than spindly shrubs seen in the last half hour, an awful shaking sensation and banging came out of the engine and then it died. It sounded like a major bearing or piston was gone, it was obvious this motor was shot. I knew I would have to use my legs from here unless I lucked out and a car came along. But still nothing had passed since yesterday so I did not want to pin my hopes there. Plus I liked the thought of the action challenge of pushing my body in a hard walk to somewhere.

I knew I would have to walk at night, even an hour of walking in this heat would pretty much kill me. My map suggested I was around sixty miles north of a bit of civilisation, a solitary station in the middle of the desert called Mongrel Downs, I had an idea that the local aborigines from hereabouts were its owners and it ran a few cattle, but my knowledge of this part of Australia was patchy. I had an almost untouched jerry can with twenty litres of water, heavy and awkward to carry though it should get me more than a few miles if I used it carefully. Food was less plentiful, half a packet of dry biscuits left, but hell an odd lizard and insect grub would suffice for a while. So I made a shelter from the side of my car to the ground below, using sticks and ropes to create a frame which I covered with branches stripped from local bushes. Under here the temperature was tolerable. I settled down to wait for dusk when the heat dropped. While I waited I cut up the seat belt strapping and made a crude harness to carry the jerry can like a backpack on my back. I worked out I should ration myself to two litres of water a day. That would give me ten days supply, which I was sure was more than enough. I could have gone lower but that seemed OK. It meant I could have four drinks of two small cups each day and, if I spared a bit, I could even use half a cup each day to wash the grit from my eyes and mouth.

I was tempted to start walking as the sun fell close to the horizon but made myself wait until it was fully down and the stars were beginning to come out. That way to worst of the heat would have left the ground and my feet and legs would get less cooked in the hot sand.

Half an hour after dark I heard a call of a hunting dingo and called it back. It seemed like a call to action so I picked up my pack and started out. The moon was thin but the stars were bright, so I could see my way well enough not to trip and fall. I had boots but it was hard enough on my feet with my poorly balanced pack and an uneven ground surface I could not quite make out. In time I fell into a steady rhythm of walking along at an even balanced pace, covering three or four kilometres per hour. My fitness was not great as I had spent most of the last year on my backside in a car or sitting around. However I took pleasure in feeling unused muscles respond to the challenge. Every hour I sat down on my pack for ten or fifteen minutes to give my aching shoulders, along with my legs and feet, a rest.

I estimated I had walked twenty miles or thirty kilometres as that first night drew to a close and a faint light band edged up the eastern horizon. There was real satisfaction from this night of walking, a familiar pleasure from its hard, steady physical activity. It seemed to clear my mind of the last year and let me see the big picture clearly. It felt like a start to healing all the bruising and grief my soul had sustained over the last year. That night I could look back at both the joy and

endlessly dashed hope with a measure of calm, not that the pain and longing for Aisma's return was gone, but I could see it more clearly as part of the roller coaster of all life.

As the dawn was breaking, and the distant landscape came to life, I spied a low depression with a couple equally low hills behind, off to the south of this track. There were a few half sized trees in this place, perhaps there was better soil or more water. It looked about half a mile from the track with a formidable mess of spinifex in between that would be hard going to cross. However it was the only bit of reasonable shelter in sight. With luck I might even catch a bird or a lizard or two in this place. So I pulled on the two pairs of long pants I was carrying, to protect my legs from the worst of the spinifex spines, and set out cross country.

It was hard going but yet it was even more satisfying to be forging a new track. I thought of leaving my jerry-can behind to collect the next night but it was my lifeline. I decided to take no chances with it, even though I could have much more easily filled the plastic water bottle I was carrying to see me through the day. The sun was well above the horizon, though not yet hot, as I reached this place. I sank my tired body in a patch of shade and fell asleep.

The rising heat of the day and moving sun, now on my body, roused me after a couple hours. I set out to explore my little oasis, no sign of water on the surface but I felt there was fair chance to find some if I dug down, plus it gave me something to do. With my knife I sharpened a digging stick and dug out a knee deep hole. Still no water but the soil was moist and cool. I got an idea; if I made the hole bigger it could make it into a cool shelter long enough to lie in which was covered over with branches. An hour saw this done; I had a two metre long ditch a couple feet wide and half a metre deep, covered over with a pile of green branches from the surrounding scrub.

I lay under my shelter and slept like a baby until the late afternoon.

A scrabbling sound woke me. Cautiously I raised my head through a gap in the branches to see a good sized goanna a bare metre away picking through the loose dirt in search of something, insects perhaps. Slowly and carefully I reached for my digging stick, it was alongside the hole within easy reach and was long enough to serve as a spear of club.

The goanna remained impervious to my slow movements, concentrating on its own digging.

I lined it up and swung my stick towards its head, club like. It connected with a dull thud. It fell down stunned. I sprung up and grabbed it, holding my prize aloft with a triumphant shout which bounced across the empty desert. An indescribable, primeval joy flooded me in my making my kill.

I knew I would feast tonight and the crocodile part of my spirit sang for joy. It was only later that I realised that it had been there living in there all along, craving its own hunting. It was an inseparable part of my being that for the last year I had forgotten and ignored. And part of the malcontent I felt was coming from it. Now this part of my soul, the hunting predator, was still and content again. Perhaps I should have been appalled at the joy in this act of destruction, so opposite to the wonderful life I had led with my wife and child. But yet I was not, it was an inseparable part of my being and demanded its own rewards too.

That night I roasted and feasted on the flesh of the goanna, sleeping with a full belly. In the deep night, I dreamed crocodile dreams of hunting and killing. Next morning I felt the renewed strength of this predator flowing in my veins, it was a presence both of me and an alien, separate but fused. My body was its tool as much as it belonged to my own mind. For now these two creatures were at peace with each other. I did not know how it might go if they disagreed.

That day I walked from early morning until lunch, rested again and walked again in the late afternoon and continued late into the night. I had not returned to the road but followed a series of paths, perhaps wallaby tracks or paths made by the ancient peoples from the distant past. They flowed up, down and around with the contours of the country, making walking easier. This path provided both shelter and plants and animal places along the way, a small rocky hillside where wallabies lived, a grove of trees where the doves and parrots feasted on ripening seeds, patches of shrubs full of insects and finches, no doubt there were other creatures too I did not see.

It was easier going than the road and continued in the right direction for where I wanted to go. And it immersed me into the land and its patterns in a way a man-made road never could.

In the predawn hours, when I rested, I knew I was now close to my destination, with around ten miles to go which I would complete in the morning cool. I was up again at dawn and started to see signs of human habitation; a rusty broken fence, a mound of old dry cattle dung.

I heard a distant buzzing, rising and falling in pitch. I knew this sound, it was a helicopter mustering in the scrub, a sound I knew well from my work on the stations in this land. I looked for an opening in the scrub and went there, quickly lighting a fire. Once it was burning well I covered it with green branches to create a smoke beacon.

Sure enough, five minutes after the smoke started to billow the noise came my way and soon the helicopter was overhead. I waved and pointed to the best place for it to land, away from the fire which I beat out. It settled like an oversized insect. The pilot was a brown skinned man, shorter than me and wiry though strong. He waved his hand. I waved back as I walked over.

“What the hell are you doing in such a god forsaken place? You don’t look lost and it’s a bloody long way from any road,” he called out.

There was a likeable quality in the voice and manner that I warmed too right away. “I thought of asking you the same,” I said. “Why would anyone fly a chopper in such a god forsaken place? It’s a place where even the lizards are half starved and no smart cow or horse would choose to live.”

“You would be surprised,” he said, “I reckon you must have chosen to walk through the worst bit and I know there is plenty of that north of here. But in another mile you will be amazed. I know I was the first time I came here. It opens out onto wide grass plains, black soil and Mitchell grass, creek flood-outs with bits of swamps when it rains. They run good cattle here it’s an oasis in the middle of nowhere. They don’t call it Mongrel Downs for nothing. Of course it’s now gone back to the original blackfella name, the name of the people of my better half. But, all said, I kinda like the name ‘Mongrel Downs’, it fits.

Anyway, I assume you want a lift. That is unless you want to stay here. I don't imagine you smoked me to come here just to say hello. By the way, my name is Vic, helicopter pilot extraordinaire," he said, shoving out his hand.

"Mark, Mark B," I said, as I climbed aboard.

He was right; the country changed a bare kilometre from my pickup point. Soon he was pushing together a mob of large fat bullocks with bellies full of grass, walking them along steadily towards where a set of yards could be seen. The country was dry now, and the grass was starting to fall away but you could see how good it would be once some rain came. Once the cattle were yarded Vic set me down, had a bite to eat at the stock camp, fuelled up and went off to pick up another mob from the other end of the paddock.

It turned out they were doing a week's work to put together several truckloads of bullocks, bound for Adelaide via Alice Springs. They would not normally have mustered at this time of year, as it was too hot and too dry. But, as the prices were really good and the stock still fat, they decided to have a go, just working in the early mornings so as not to knock the cattle around in the heat. With the hot dry weather the main surface waters were running out. So they had no choice but to move the stock off that part of the station anyway and pull down their numbers. It made sense to cash in what they could before they began to lose condition.

I ended up staying there for the week, working with Vic as well as doing other jobs. They were happy for my help and offered to pay me but I figured this one was on me, already Vic had gone over and above to come and pick me up. And two days later he organised a four wheel drive to head up the Tanami Track to collect my ute and tow it back to Mongrel Downs. The car was past being of use to me, it was not worth my while to take it to Alice Springs to fit a new motor.

So in the end the local mechanic took it off my hands for a nominal sum. He said he would fix it up in due course and sell it off to the local aboriginal community. That was fine by me.

When they heard I was a former horse breaker they asked if I would put a bit of work into a few of their young horses over the week as they needed more horse in their stock plant. I was happy to do so as I had missed this part of my life in Africa.

When the week was up Vic offered me a lift into Alice, on board his chopper. Already we were mates and it seemed good to me to go with him. He had watched me work the horses and knew I had the ability. He told me he would put out the word with more of the stations around the Alice if I was interested in more of this work.

Plus we formed a half idea about getting into the contract mustering business together, he would handle the sky work and I could put together a plant of vehicles and horses to go in on the ground. He had connections to places where I could source the gear at a good price and we worked well together, neither shirking the hard stuff but both enjoying a beer and the banter that went with it.

Vic was good to his word. I soon had more work than I could fit in. It was a good living, a mix of horse breaking and working for local contractors to muster cattle from the rough steep hills that circled the town. Soon I had my own plant of a truck and six steady stock horses, along with two bull catchers. I was starting to do work on my own but I would call Vic in whenever a job needing a fly in the sky

came along. By the end of six months we were tight, in the way of true best mates. It felt like I had gained the brother I had never known other than that brief time with Felipe.

Chapter 23

The Legend Grows.

Towards the middle of the year, as the weather was cooling, I was working in the hills east of Alice, the East MacDonnell Ranges, on stations such as Loves Creek and Ambalindum. These places had spines of big mountains with lots of creeks and rivers running in valleys between. They were full of scrub cattle and brumbies, with the scrub bulls worth good money if they could be caught and sent to the meatworks. In the open parts of the valleys I could use a mob of coacher bullocks to work the scrubbers into and hold them with a couple steady horses. But in the rough stuff it was more a job for helicopters, first finding, then chasing and buzzing them in incredibly tight spaces so as to get them to break into the open where we could pick them up with either a bull catcher or a horse.

In my opinion Vic was far and away the best pilot in the business. His machines were less modern than some but he could get almost impossible performance out of them. He knew, within an inch, where his tail rotor and blade tips were. He put himself into situations that would have scared the pants of any sane pilot. But Vic had a bit of the crazies, like me, he was my sort of man as well as my mate.

So we often worked together, sometimes I would ride shotgun with him, using a lot of stinging bird shot rounds to move bulls trying to hole up in the trees on the sides of mountains. But mostly I worked on the ground and he did his aerial thing. Together we cleaned out country that others said was impossible. Along the way we both made excellent money.

We also had similar taste in girls, typically dark haired mysterious types. If anything Vic had the better success, he had the promise of a helicopter ride next day as a sweetener after all.

We would work hard for a days and weeks but ensure we got off for the bush events, the Harts Range Bush Races, the Aileron Campdraft and a range of others, including various minor rodeos. These events were part of the entertainment and a rite of passage challenge for the local station lads who fancied they could ride a wild horse or bull as well as magnet for the town girls who wanted to meet a station boy. I was mostly too full of booze and bad manners to consider entry in the events. But I enjoyed being a spectator and found it was a good way of getting to know the people from the stations near and far as well as a great break from the work.

I also had a separate business picking up the best young brumby colts and mares, out in the rough hills, breaking them in and selling them to the stations around. It didn't make real money but it gave me pleasure and a bit of a name as someone who could handle a mad horse.

As a result at the camp-drafts, races and rodeos around the bush places I found my advice was sought out about little tricks to help a rider or tactics for handling a mad horse or bull. Sometimes Vic would needle me that I was too chicken to put my name in and enter an event. I would throw it back saying, "Fine talk for a hero helicopter pilot who is scared on the ground." It was good natured banter.

One day, back in the hills after a successful three days of catching bulls we had a full road train load in the yards and were waiting for the truck to arrive, making idle talk.

Vic opened, "Last weekend I was in the Alice talking about the upcoming Alice Springs Rodeo and how I had a mate called MB who was a handy rider. I said I was trying to get him to enter an event in one of the bush races and he never would, always fobbing me off with some excuse. You know, things like: 'too drunk too tired, sore feet,' the list goes on and on as you should know.

"One of the blokes in the group was just up from South Australia, he had worked a few years in the Flinders Ranges, various places, and been to most rodeos around there including the real famous one at Carrieton. Anyway when I said the MB name he sat up and listened, saying, 'What did you say that name was, MB?'

"I nodded, 'MB is the moniker he goes by. Mark and a B name though he rarely uses the B name, just the initial.

"He asked me to describe you. I told him about your general looks, ugly as a dog but otherwise OK.

"So he told his story about how a few years ago, perhaps three or four, a guy from nowhere with the moniker 'MB' entered the rides for bareback and saddlebronc at Carrieton and cleaned them both up. They were the best rides anyone had seen in years, he rode time in both and got near on perfect scores, just a couple minor technical markdowns to show he was not a pro.

"This guy said he watched from the stands and it was hard to describe just how good both rides really were. He said the horses were mongrels and really turned it on, Crackerjack and Devil Stripe were their names and almost no one had ever ridden time on them before. He said this MB bloke seemed to communicate and get an extra edge out of both horses while making it look as easy as child's play.

"He finished by saying, 'It lives in my memory as the best two rides I have ever seen. The announcer and crowd were all cheering, saying the Breaker, Harry Morant, had returned and everyone was calling him Breaker MB. It had the makings of a big story. Next day, all the press were flocking around like bees to a honey pot, wanting to get a story from the new Breaker. But he had vanished, gone to a place unknown never to be seen again. It became a sort of legend thereabouts, that 100 years on the Breaker had returned for a night and taught the locals how to ride. Then he had gone back to whatever other world he lives in now.

The only two people who claimed otherwise were the head stockman from Oorooroo, Jack Jones. He said this lad had worked for him an couple years before and that was where he began to ride as a green kid from the city. Jack said he knew at once the kid had potential, though he was sort of cagey about who he was and where he had gone. He said his name was Mark Brown but that was not the name on the entry form, so who knows.

The other who swore there was a real man was a girl, Eva, the year's rodeo queen. She had brought him to her swag for the night. She said she knew the feel of a real man and her story was hard to doubt. But she said when she woke in the morning there was just her in the swag with the two award medals, but not the trophies, left on her pillow. A couple papers offered her hard cash for them, but she said she would keep them as her mementos of a great night."

Vic finished his story, as if talking about someone that neither of us knew. Then turned so me, eyebrows raised, saying, "So?"

I replied, "So!"

He turned to face me full on saying, "Stop the bullshit, you fucker, I know it was you, two MBs that look like you and ride like you is hardly likely.

"The man from nowhere, who nobody knows, who turns up on foot in the middle of the Tanami Desert, living more like a blackfella than me, his car abandoned more than fifty miles of trackless scrub behind him, though he was a bright and chipper as the morning dew when he waved me down and looked like he could walk another thousand miles if he had to.

"Just fess up that it was you. I will keep your secret on one condition, that you enter the Alice Springs Rodeo, so I can see whether you can really ride like that story goes, and of course the rest of the town gets to see it too.

"Choose any name you like and I won't let on that the legend of Breaker has returned. Others can work that out for themselves if you are as good as the story says.

I burst out laughing and Vic laughed too!

"Your smart black devil," I said, "too smart for your own good. If it ends up I can ride half as good as you fly we will be a real pair, won't we. Perhaps we can put on a daredevil show together and make some real money."

"My one condition is that once it is done, that is the Alice Springs Rodeo, you will never pester me to ride another buckjumper again. Plus you tell your mate that the Breaker MB story stays back where it belongs."

I put out my hand, "Deal?"

Vic shook my hand, "Deal!"

So I rode in the two events and cleaned up. I did not expect to but got caught up in the excitement of it all. I found I knew quite a lot of the players from my time with Fred, and while some did not recognise me as the grown up version of that callow lad, others did and welcomed me into their fold. Before I knew it I had agreed to ride in the other rodeos that year across the NT and even the famous one in Mount Isa.

I had a good year, not quite as good as the pundits were predicting, but drawing a dud horse or two is always part of the game. Some people pushed me to have a go at the bulls, but I would not, I had promised myself on the day one finished Fred that the only thing I would do with bulls was catch them and send them to have their heads cut off. I held to my promise, not that it was reasonable to blame all the bulls for the action on one.

So by the end of the year I was placed second in the rankings for the NT rodeos, and won the Mount Isa bareback and came second in the saddle-bronc. I was more than happy with that and I made a good amount of money from the rides I rode.

Fame is a fickle thing and it was a good to be brought back to the pack. Many people pushed me to go further afield, to join the full professional circuit and become a big national rodeo name, but that held no appeal. I had a good business in the Alice and I loved working with Vic and other mates. When you lose something precious it makes you value what you have and what I had was more than enough for me then.

Still sometimes around a campfire or in a bar, when others did not know I could hear, I would catch a snip of conversation about me and my ability, how I should push myself harder and maybe I would live up to the promise of walking in the Breaker's footsteps. It continued to seem a tad presumptuous to be put in the same class with the legend, but it also stoked my ego.

Chapter 24

Opals.

The following year I dropped out of the rodeo circuit. I felt I had done enough to prove I could ride. I did not want to spend half my life travelling from town to town basking in the reflected glory of others saying how great I was. It was enough to have done it well once. Now I had a bigger responsibility which meant I had a living to earn.

I was determined that I would keep regular money flowing to my child in Africa through his grandmother. It was in part out of affection for my child, along with his grandmother and the other people of the village, but it came mostly from a sense of continuing obligation to the memory of my departed wife. At least once and, when I could manage it, twice each year I would fly to Africa and visit Nathaniel, spending a week or two with him. He was small yet, not ready to come travelling with me, and I wanted him to grow up in a safe and secure place with the people he knew. The life of the village gave him that which my life travelling in the bush could not. As a small child bursting with life he was a joy to behold. Even though seeing him brought pain back of the loss of my wife the pain was easier to bear now.

Each time I was in Africa I tried to visit Pieter, even just for a day or two. He had continued to be one of the most important people in my life, even though our meetings were infrequent. I tried to stay for at least a night with his family when I could and his children all called me Uncle Marco. The last time I visited there was only his wife and me there for the first night. Pieter was yet to return from a trip. She decided she needed to talk to me seriously about finding another woman, as to date, apart from many passing one night stands with the girls I met around Alice Springs there had been no significant women in my life. She told me it was time to move on, that Aisha would expect it, and I was selling myself short endlessly moving from girl to girl.

I did not really take her advice on board, I thought that part of my life, with endless variety, was alright, but it was food for occasional thought.

I had started another business, buying and selling gems. The hills around the Alice were full of fossickers and small scale miners who I had steadily got to know. It began with meeting them as a bull catching contractor working in their patch. I would meet them in their camps at their diggings as I made my way through this country.

Then I would often meet them again at the bush pubs and country races where they would sit off to one side, a rum in hand, soaking up the music. As most of them worked hard a long way from the shops, with an occasional trip to town, perhaps monthly to buy basic food and mining supplies, they were always looking for meat and fresh produce. Meat often came my way for free, something down in the yards, or with a broken leg would give me more than I could ever eat and, even though I gave some away to aboriginal camps, there was still more left over.

So I fitted my four wheel drive with a big cooler box on the back and kept a supply of ice on hand in various places. This let me keep what I had cold for two or three days. Each time I went to Alice Springs I would stock up on fresh fruit and vegetables, a bag of potatoes, carrots, onions, apples and oranges were staple fare that kept well enough. In the cool box I would put a good pile of lettuce, cucumber, tomatoes and the like. It was not gourmet cuisine but it was well received in every bush camp.

And, after working with Pieter for that one year, I was surprised at my retained knowledge about gems of many types, their value and quality. At first it started as a hobby and a conversation piece. I would ask how miners were going and what good finds they had made. They would bring out their treasure trove and talk with infectious excitement as they enthused about their newest discovery.

But I realised many were poor marketers of their products, they often did not understand the real value of the different gems, just which one was a good piece. Often they got fleeced by the gem traders in the town of which most were in cahoots and belonged to the shyster league.

So, as I got to know the different miners, we got to chatting about the value of their gems. I told them I had been a gem buyer for a diamond trader in South Africa. As a result a couple of them asked me to act on their behalf in selling to the buyers in Alice Springs, Coober Pedy or Adelaide.

So I did, on the basis that I would take a twenty percent cut of the best price I could negotiate. Soon the word got around that I was an intermediary who could be trusted. What I started to do was create a little stockpile from a couple trips and then head on down to Coober Pedy where there was a much better collection of gem merchants than in Alice Springs. It was less than half as far as Adelaide, a mere 700 kilometres, which seemed an easy half day drive. Soon I had checked out a range of gem merchants there, showing them odd pieces until I found one I could trust to be fair and honest.

His name was Nikko. He was a team with his wife Athena, both Greek. He introduced me lots of miners around the town. He encouraged me to seek out gems from them too, particularly opals, which were the town's mainstay.

Along the way I learned from him and others how to grade and value these multi-coloured stones. As well as buying for Nikko there were times when I saw a stone I particularly liked and decided to start my own collection. At times I took these in payment for services rendered, like a new truck a miner needed which

cost me \$5000. For this the agreed price was a ruby which I told him I could on-sell for \$6000 with my twenty percent cut. I first intended to do so but I liked it so much that I kept it.

At other times if I wanted to keep something I would get Nikko and another Coober Pedy trader to value it and I would pay the best of these two prices. That way over two years I acquired a dozen stones which were highly portable wealth. If ever the need arose I was confident I could cash these in quickly for over \$100,000. It was like my insurance policy against unexpected disaster, to make sure my child could be properly looked after if something happened to me. I had a plan to leave them with a solicitor in Darwin so that, in the event of my demise, their proceeds could be made available to my son and his grandmother in the form of an annual annuity. It never came to pass as other events overtook it.

One night, at the end of a trip from the Alice, to Coober Pedy, before I returned the following day, I was sitting in the corner of a local pub. Nikko and a couple other traders had been there for a couple hours as we had celebrated the success of our business. Then they had to go to attend to family duties. I knew both the wives were good women, best not crossed, so I knew their excuse was real. With them gone I had a melancholy moment, sitting in the corner, wishing I had Aisha to go home too along with my bold, brown faced son. It was not that there was a shortage of women in my life, but beyond loving their warm bodies they had little connection to me.

It must have been spread over my face because a bit later an old codger, Eric, who I knew a little, came and asked if he could join me for a drink. Once seated, he said, "Penny for your thoughts. You look a bit too sad and serious on this fine night."

So I told him the bare bones of the story, how I had an African wife who got sick and died, how we had a small boy, Nathaniel, who I had left to be raised with his grandmother in a village and how I missed them both. I had never told this story before, not even to Vic, who, though my best mate, was a person to whom I had stayed as the man from nowhere.

But it felt good to have unburdened myself to this old man, his face lined from the sun and many years of hard living. In return he told me a bit of his own story, how he had once had a wife and child in Brisbane and they had died in a car crash, head on collision with a drunk who had died too. So there was no one left to blame and how the pain near tore him in two. That was over thirty years ago and he had never been back to Brisbane, not even to see their grave. He said his own health was not great now and as a result he probably never would go back there.

A month later, when I came back on my next trip I met Eric again and we again fell to talking about life, the good and the bad. As I was getting up to go, ahead of a busy day of buying and selling in the town, he said. "If you're still here tomorrow night, I have something I would like show you. T'would be good if ye'd come to my place. Having said that he handed me a scap of paper with the address, *Van 16, Opal Caravan Park*, written on it.

I nodded and put the paper scrap in my wallet. I near on forgot the next night but a little bell rang in my brain as I was walking to my regular hotel at the end of a long day. Soon enough I found myself at his van at the caravan park which I had

seen in the main street of town. The van was neat and tidy with a few flower pots to give a splash of colour sitting outside the door.

He grinned when he saw me and called out, "Just putting the kettle on then I will join you outside, cooler there."

A table and two chairs sat under the awning and I took a seat at one. After a few minutes he came out with a battered teapot in one hand and a rum bottle in the other. He returned to bring out a bottle of water, two shot glasses and two tin mugs. He poured us both tea into our mugs then a nip of rum and a dash of water into our shot glasses.

He passed one set to me then lifted his own, "To a chance of an exciting discovery after many a long year. Not Lasseter's Reef, but maybe another buried treasure trove in the outback, if you've got a mind to go look.

I've got too old to go back there myself and I don't want the knowledge to die with me when my time's up. So I figured, I need to find one I can trust and pass my story on to him. I've been talking to a few old miners and traders around the town. The word is you're one such, one to trust that is!"

I nodded non-committedly but did not answer so he continued.

He pulled out an old raggedly looking map and proceeded to talk to it. "First you go to Birdsville and turn right, heading towards Brisbane. You'll find yourself running alongside a big river, tis about 100 miles on, along that road. Cross a big river channel, runs north into the Diamantina, the next set of wheel tracks after you come back to the ridge country heading east is the turnoff. Used to be three old piles of stones, heaped up side by side, next to the turn off, though twenty years on they may not be there. From there this the map will take you on, it's an old abandoned set of diggings, ten or twenty abandoned mines on a ridge where no one goes.

"They reckoned it was a dud, mostly trash stones and the odd bit with colour all taken out. Boulder opal country. But me, I decided to have a look myself one day, actually I was there for nigh on two weeks. There was an old digging one side of a gully, bad soil that would fall in as you worked. I reckon the guy who opened it had given it away because one side of the main shaft had fallen in. Anyway I shore it up and reopened it to the bottom and then along a side tunnel, bout as long as a cricket pitch.

"Twas going well and I would have cleaned it out except a big storm came and a flash flood ran down the gully. It filled up all my diggings with mud and slush. It knew it would be a month or two til it drained away and I could get back to it and clean it out again. In the meantime I came here, got to work and have never left.

"But on the last day I found this," he said, pulling out a handkerchief.

Inside was a bantam egg sized stone. Not much to look at on the outside but then he separated it into two halves and the most fabulous opal I had even seen shone out.

I whistled, "B'Jesus, don't let anyone see it, people have been put in a hole for much less than that."

"Yeah, but then I have kept it hidden and not shown it to anyone, until today, for over 25 years. So if it was to happen could only be you!"

With that he laughed and I laughed back.

“See, in the end you’ve got to trust someone. Word around the traps is that you are fair and keep your promises. So the deal is; of whatever you get out and sell, half the profit is my share and half is yours to keep. I realise I cannot hold you to it, but as I say, trust is trust, my word is my bond. I reckon tis the same with you, tis what I thought after you told me your own story.”

I put out my hand, “Deal. Only thing is, I have work to do back in Alice until full on summer, you know, mustering contracts and the like. So the earliest I can go up there to check it out is then. Will you come with me?”

“Nah,” he said, “my days for that sort of work, digging and climbing in an out of a mine shaft, are past. Don’t even really need the money. But still a share is a share and I will hold you to a half share. But what I most want is for you to come back and tell me the story of what you found there.”

Chapter 25

Elfin Queen.

In my diary I tell Elin’s story and I won’t repeat it here except for odd bits that add an understanding or things that seem significant now looking back over almost five years.

I loved Aisha and there was a piece missing from my soul with her passing. In her I had seen my idea of perfection, an intrinsic loveliness, part coming from an external look of radiant beauty and part from an internal quality of fierce goodness and right. She had many other things too, her intellect, her courage and a hidden mischief in her soul. Even in the worst of times she could draw me out of myself, make me smile and laugh and chase the demons away.

She set a standard in what she was that was very far beyond me and my character. Notwithstanding my deficiencies, she loved me for something she saw within me that she deemed to be good. Her fierceness was evident in the way she fought back against the pimp even though it always ended badly for her. But her goodness remained; she kept up the work that allowed her to support her mother, brother and sister even at the cost of her own life.

Then, when the need came to protect her own, me, her defender, she had not procrastinated but acted decisively, taking a rock from the ground the size of an orange and hitting his skull with all her power so his head broke like an eggshell. She could instead have done something to distract him and allow me to fight on with a chance to win. But she took control at that point. She took it on herself to exercise justice, justice for the many wrongs he had done to her and to others she knew.

When I told her later about those I had killed, the soldiers who had murdered Felipe and his village, she gave her approval to my action, saying that in a lawless society, or when the law fails us, it is our right to protect ourselves and our own, and also to take vengeance, without mercy, on evil when the chance comes.

She believed in swift justice as I did, not waiting for a cumbersome legal system to grind its way forward. She saw little point locking evil people in a cage for years if, when they were let out, they would go and do evil again. It was better to act decisively, remove their scourge from the world, let them face their judgement in the hereafter, sooner rather than later. She had a strong belief in the afterlife, God and judgement, reinforced by all that had been done to her.

But yet, despite this fierceness in her, there was much goodness too; the goodness to care for her family, to sacrifice herself for her child and to do nothing to harm his future despite the cost to her. And there was abundant goodness to me in giving me this priceless gift of my own child to love and care for. If it did nothing else it made me grow up and take responsibility. I think she knew this was a good thing for me to have and that it would make me into a better person.

Now, even though I lived hard and partied well, I always knew I had the responsibility to support my child. I always set aside the money for his care and welfare before I took money for myself. And I made sure I visited him at least once a year to ensure all was well with him, his grandmother and the village. I always sent a good amount of extra money for the rest of the village, not just for my own child.

This was partly pragmatic in that I did not want jealousy to grow about his special status, and I knew it takes a village to raise a child. But it was also done in affection and gratitude. I remembered the kindness of many people there in my wife's final days and since she had passed.

These people grieved for Aisha's loss and gave me the sense that having grief for one we love is good. And slowly, visit after visit, they taught me how to move on. In the village, once a year had passed after a man or woman died, the person would take a new partner and soon more children would come. They did not continue to live in the past; they had responsibilities to the living and treated protracted grief as self-indulgent. It was something of this that Pieter's wife had also tried to explain to me, that it was time to move on and I would not get what I needed from endless casual affairs.

A month before Christmas, in the summer after I met the old opal miner; I went to Mozambique to my son's village. I was there just in time for his fifth birthday, and brought him a birthday present of a bat and ball so he could play village cricket with his friends. I stayed on for Christmas and for this occasion I bought a present that was both for him and other village children around his age. It was four child size bicycles.

While some of the adults had bikes, as easier transport than walking, the only child who had a bike was the son of the village headman. While it was a well-intentioned gift of a good man, I realised that it had the unintended consequence of isolating this boy from his friends, in that he had something they did not have. It also meant he could only ride by himself unless another adult lent one of his friends their bike, which was rare.

So I decided that, while I wanted my son to have a bike, I did not want this to set him apart, and I wanted his friends, both boys and girls, to enjoy riding bikes too. So I bought four new bikes in a store in Maputo, two shiny red ones and two shiny blue ones. I chose tyres that would not go flat from the many thorns that grew on the local acacia bushes. On Christmas day I gave my gift to the whole

village, particularly to all the children of a size to ride them. For a couple hours I set myself to giving push bike riding lessons to all who asked, both boys and girls. I felt a great delight as I watched each ride off on their first wobbly path.

I stayed until the end of January which marked five years since my wife had died. On my last day in the village we had a commemoration service for Aisha's life.

The church choir had learned a new song for the service. Because I was an Australian they had chosen a song by an Australian song writer, Paul Kelly, based on Psalm 23. The pastor spoke about her good life, her joy and vitality, the gift of her son and the ongoing kindness of her grandmother in raising our child, then thanked me for coming to see them all and continuing to support my son and the rest of the village. Then the choir sang their song. I do not exactly remember the words but they go something like this.

*I am your true shepherd, I will lead you there.
Beside still waters.
Come and meet me in the middle of the air.
I will lay you down in pastures green and fair.*

There was something healing in these simple words. I felt Aisha was speaking directly to me, freeing me from the past, saying for her it was good and one day I would meet her in this other place, in the air. It seemed she was saying, 'Goodbye for now. I will see you in another place.'

In that instant it felt like something was lifted from me and I should now move on with my own life.

Two weeks later I was having breakfast in Coober Pedy, having packed my vehicle and made my plan for my trip in search of the lost opal mine. The night before I made my final plans with Eric about the search. I had promised him again his half share of whatever I found. He, in parting, had warned me to be extra careful, the ground was unstable and needed to be shored up.

I nodded, saying, "Sure Mate," but only half listening.

Part way through my eating she walked in the door, bold as brass, my Elfin Queen. I knew in a moment, the way one sometimes does, that our destiny was linked. What I did not know was that in my 'Sure Mate' were the seeds of her destruction. Perhaps the gods of fate already had decided that her time was almost past, like the moth that glows brightest in that instant before the flame burns it.

My biggest regret in her sudden passing was that we did use our time better together. Rather than digging a hole in the middle of nowhere, instead to take the little we owned, buy a boat and sail it far away to the most distant reaches of the world.

Of our less than two weeks of shared life, what can I say—It was bright and glorious, like a shooting star, incandescent in the night sky in those few seconds before the light was utterly gone.

Anyway I will just repeat the bare bones of the story which I wrote out more fully in my diary and some may have read as I promised it to Vic.

Her name was Elin, she was blond and mid tall, perhaps five foot six, Swedish in the classical way though not quite a classical Nordic beauty, a little sharper in

the features. But still beautiful in her own way, I had seen Lord of the Rings not long before and she reminded me of the Elfin Queen, at least her hair was like that, the golden flowing tresses, though tied back to keep it in hand except at night when it was like a luminous cloud around her face, particularly in moonlight. For all that she was not a classical soft beauty, her body was lean and muscled, she had last worked on a Greenpeace ship as a deckhand, being tossed around in the Southern Ocean. She was a brave soul with no hint of timidity in her demeanour. Her decision to come with me was instant, she saw an adventure and went with it, all the way to the end.

I knew, within a minute of meeting her, that I would make love to her before the day was done and she knew it too, that's what she told me and said she wanted as instantly as I did. But it was the meeting of our minds even more than the joining of our bodies that was most special.

On meeting her she was ravenous for food and I offered her my part eaten plate which she shared and ate most of. Then her own food came and she ate most of that too. She carried only a light backpack with a couple changes of work clothes, a pair of skimpy swimmers and a diaphanous dress of white muslin for formal occasions. In the light it showed her curves, and in the night I loved to take it off.

So the first day we drove from Coober Pedy, via William Creek to Maree. It was as hot a day as you get, high forties by lunch time. Our first stop was a spring in the desert, a palm oasis of cool water in the baking heat. We ate dripping ice creams that melted as fast as we could eat them with our toes in cool water. Then we took off our clothes and each licked the last drops of sweetness off the other with our mouths as our naked bodies locked together on hot sand. The prickles in the sand onto which I pushed her bare back and bottom and which she rolled me onto as soon as she got a chance, only heightened the orgasmic pleasure.

That night we walked on the quicksand bed of a dry lake and slept on a far out ridge surrounded by salt plains which shimmered in the moonlight and glowed pink as the dawn came. In that night she told me she was the desert queen of an inland sea and I was her king, made just for the purpose of taking her to places she had never been.

She told me too of the Nordic boat her father and mother had sailed together in icy lakes which her father then buried her mother in, in a land above the Arctic Circle. She told me how in winter these lakes would be sheets of ice crystals which sparkled on the low sun, remarkably like the way the first rays of dawn lit our desert lake. She even joked that if she died this would be a good place to be buried, under the shimmering surface of a sparkling lake in a boat that she and I had made.

I did not know at the time the strange prophecy of her words, not that I brought her back to the lake, it was too far. But we built the boat she rested in. When that day was done, the part of me that still held enough belief to say a prayer, prayed earnestly that the Gods of her ancestors would find her in this place and use her boat to take her home.

But back to the story of our digging for opals. It took three days to find the place of the abandoned opal mine using the map of the old miner. Elfin was as good a navigator as me, if not better, used to reading maps and the sky to navigate in the

oceans. So, together, we worked out our way by a mixture of symbols and landmarks until we reached the place told of.

The next day we started work digging out the rubble from our half-filled mine. It was clear which one it was, on the side of the gully. The upside of the slope had collapsed as told with the storm and flood, and while at first we used it to go down and begin our digging, it seemed of a highly unstable soil type, loose crumbly sand mixed with bits of rock rubble. The other side seemed better, more of a hard clay soil, though still with bits of sand and rock mixed in. So we build a ladder up this side out of bush timber and used a rope and bucket to haul the soil to the surface and carry the soil a short way downslope where we placed it in a pile.

It was slow and backbreaking work of which we both took turns. Each would dig and fill the bucket below for about half an hour while the other winched it up and carried it away. The odd big rock I lifted with the vehicle winch in a sling. It was easier to do small loads than big, to reduce the lifting effort. As we went down, ever deeper, the lift became harder and the loads were smaller still.

But our working together, side by side or one up and one down, was a pleasure. We laughed and joked, told stories and stopped for rests whenever the fancy took us, sometimes we splashed water on each other or rubbed on mud to beat the heat. By three days we had cleaned out the down shaft to about twenty feet below, where the side shaft started. Then we got to work on this. It was even slower as all the old shoring timbers had rotted so we had to cut new bush timber for our roof and wall supports. We compared the blisters on our hands and the splinters in our fingers from the rough wood as part of our play.

On the seventh day we declared a day of rest. If it was good enough for God, then it was good enough for us too. We went down to the river, at the bottom of the hill. It was small and brown but flowing still between a series of slow pools. We brought down old sheets of tin from the abandoned mines and, with a mix of this, bush timber and local mud, we made our boat. We made timber ribbing in a boat shape to fix the metal sheets onto. Soon a boat like shape was born and mud filled the joins to stop most leaks. It took most of the day until it was done. In the cooler part of the afternoon it was ready to ride in with only a trickle of leaks.

There was no wind for a sail but we each had an oar and rowed it back and forwards along the length of our pool. Then Elfin took off her clothes and lay naked in the prow while she instructed her king in how to row her in style and not be distracted by her naked form. We finished our rest day a feast as befits a king and queen, and completed it with loving under the stars until the moon rose after midnight and gave us its pale shimmering light.

Two more days found us ready to begin our main work, the face of the old mine had been reached and the opal glints were plain. The first real clue to its value was when Elfin swung her pick into the face and a sparkling thing fell away. She had broken in half an egg shaped rock and its contents were a brilliant spray of lights and colours in the battery light we worked by. I found and took out the other half and we brought it to the surface where we washed and cleaned it. I declared, as the finder, this was her stone to keep. It truly was superb; this first one was the best of all we found. So she put it in a pouch and hung it around her neck as a memento of the mine.

After this we worked for three days until we had as much as we thought we could carry, many buckets full of fabulous boulder opals, some plain to see, others with just hints of colour on their nobbled surfaces giving a bare hint of the colour hidden within.

We decided to take our haul and divide it into two parts, one part for me and Elin and one part for old Jake. Tomorrow we would divide it, taking a share for us and a share for him—stone by stone in alternate measure. Until it was done we would not decide whose was whose, except for Elin's stone which had been set aside. When the division was done we would determine ownership with the toss of a coin. The next day we did our division, took the pile for Eric and hid it away in a place known only to us. Then we loaded our share into the back of our truck. Tomorrow we would use the pile of rubble we had excavated to backfill the mine down shaft, not the other part. Then we would throw across the shaft broken timber, any sheets of iron and other rubbish to hide our recent activity before we took our part to Brisbane to sell. I could have taken it back to Coober Pedy but there was too much for a little town. I needed a big city merchant to handle it slowly so we did not flood the market and give clues to our new discovery. Plus the weight of what we had mined was too great to carry in one car load, so it would wait for our return journey to carry it back to Coober Pedy. I wanted Elin to be there with me when we showed it to the old man and told him what we had found.

I was pottering about our camp, making us both a drink before I looked for some food for dinner when I heard a rumble and faint cry, little thinking what it was.

I looked around. Elin was nowhere in sight. In a flash I realised our rubble pile was gone and, with it, half the wall of this side of the shaft. I knew then, without looking further, that she was down there somewhere. It took until the last light to find my way down to her, guided by her occasional sounds.

I called out to her, letting her know I was coming but all I got back, were soft, almost breathless squeaks.

At last I saw fair hair. With an effort pulled away a lump of timber that held rubble of her face. Her eyes lit up when she saw me, but also held a look of pained resignation; she knew it was all too late. Remarkably her face was almost perfect, just a couple small cuts and bruises from rock shard splinters. But between me and her body was a big ugly lump of rock, the size of one of those exercise medicine balls. It took all my strength to lift it free, it must have weighed 100 kilos.

Underneath was her crushed and broken body, her half stove in chest, crushed pelvis and who knew what other injuries. In the instant I knew too what her eyes were saying, that it was hopeless.

So I carried her up, as gently as I could, trying not to hurt her more. I felt she wanted to see the sky and feel the breeze as she died. So I sat with her for another half an hour until her breathing stopped. I told her I loved her and, in that place between worlds, I would bring her safe home to the land of her Viking ancestors, my warrior queen. And with the barest of breaths she whispered she loved me too and was glad to have met me and come to this place. There was no reproach in her words or in her eyes. In the end her breaths became infrequent and then came no more. Soon after her eyes were wide and I knew her soul was gone.

I held her with tears on my cheeks, some of hers and some of mine and listened as the night grew full and she became cold. Then I wrapped my arms around her and slept that way until the morning. When the sky was just light I walked down to the river with a pick and shovel, leaving her covered in our bed to keep the flies and birds away. I found a flat place next to the bank, just above our boat and I dug a hole, it was longer and wider than the boat and I dug and dug until my head was below the dirt pile and my chest was level with the ground. Then I slid the boat into the hole, walked up the hill and carried her down in the blankets we had shared, with her pack and things over my shoulder. I lay her in the boat, half propped in the bow, and rested her things in her lap, keeping only her passport, thinking that, when the time came, I would send her family her share of our opal find.

From a few steps away it looked like she was in peaceful repose, waiting for the lover to come. The many coloured stone she had found was in its pouch. I placed this in her lap too, to pay the ferryman to carry her over.

I looked at the sky and wiped my eyes dry then filled in the hole, marking its place with a circle of stones, like an ancient druid circle but smaller.

I hoped these would bring good spirits here to guard her resting place beneath my stone circle. Before day was done I had left that place behind.

I could not bear the thought of a night there without her smile.

I went, as we had planned to Brisbane and sold some stones, only one bucket full, but I was over a million dollars richer. It seemed more than I could ever want. So I placed the rest of the stones in a secure storage place until I could bring myself to deal further with them. Then I returned to the desert home from which I had come. From there I sent half the money I had been paid as a bank cheque to the old opal miner, Eric. It was only a first instalment but it would do for now. I ignored my promise to visit him. I could not bear to speak again of this story.

A year later, I heard he had died a happy man. He had donated his estate to a local charity and that seemed good and fitting.

Chapter 26

The Solace of Loneliness.

So I returned to the life I knew and the business I had made, bought a new four wheel drive with some of my money but otherwise I continued on as normal, trying to act as if the trip had never been, that it was all a figment of a dream. My soul knew otherwise: I ached for the smiling face and feel of the body of my Elfin Queen, particularly on bright moonlight nights when her image came to me, a shimmering radiant glow of her hair. But except in my dreams she was not there and, in time, I found I dreamed of her less as new memories supplanted her.

A small ring of friends, with Vic at the centre, was my mainstay. Between interludes of intense work they kept me joined to the world outside despite the

inside hole that I often felt my life had been sucked down, a hole of the vanished, living in another land

And of course chasing the new girls in town was all part of their game in the bars and nightspots across the town. I did not really try but it seemed the less effort I made the more they came on to me. Before long another warm woman body, then another and another again had drifted past my life. Most names escape me; there was a Sharon, a Helen, perhaps a Judy amongst them, and other names too. Some were nurses, some were teachers, some were office workers from the town, some came from stations around, some were married women looking for adventure when husbands were out of town, others were travellers just passing through. I found I liked the travellers best; it avoided the need to see them again when a night or two had passed whereas many local girls wanted it to continue or for something more to follow and I wanted none of that.

It is funny how a wad of cash makes one socially desirable, the ability to buy a stranger a drink or a meal without thought of the cost, the freedom to buy good things as one saw them. I did not seek waste my money but my bush work was earning a more than good living. And with the reserve of cash I had, and the knowledge there was several times that amount unrealised, I found it easy to live well and spend money without counting it.

Half way through the year after Elfin I remembered my former friend the Brisbane professor from the Riversleigh dig. I made a gap in my work for a month and headed north, liking the idea of finding more fossils with him and tapping his knowledge on this ancient landscape.

Along the way I discovered a magnificent waterhole on the Frew River called Policeman's Lagoon. Few people knew of it and the bad road made it hard to get to. I stopped there and camped for two nights in solitary loneliness, catching a yellow belly fish the first night and a wood duck the second night for dinner.

My days were spent alone, walking the red rock hills and swimming in clear icy winter water. Here I began a diary, in the years since Africa I had become a serious reader, sometimes of novels but more often of the true stories of people and places, particularly the historical stories of this land and its pioneers and explorers, Burke and Wills, Ludwig Leichardt, We of the Never Never, Flynn of the Outback and many others. But there were times I did not want to read and instead felt stories running through my brain, coming from the things I saw and knew.

So, in empty hours, while I sat by that empty waterhole, watching a whistling kite circle in the high sky, I started to write down these things and memories. I decided what I told would begin after I returned from Africa, the trip to Alice by car and foot, stories of Vic, stories of bush miners and stockmen, little vignettes from the beds of the girls I met. I even made up imaginary stories inside my head and wrote them down to practice my craft. I was not yet ready to write about Elin so I wrote of other things. I soon filled ten pages of mixed anecdotes before I travelled on, my diary behind the seat.

After the Frew River I came up to the Barkly Tablelands, open grasslands full of huge cattle stations. I worked my way from station to station, not seeking work but calling in for a cuppa at the scattered homesteads and stock camp I stumbled across here and there. I always carried a good supply of little things to offer

around, a packet of biscuits, a rich fruit cake, some dried fruit and nuts. In these places of monotonous diets these little things were welcomed. Meals, new stories, local directions and casual friendship were given in return.

After a week I came to Riversleigh and found the professor hard at work with a new batch of assistants. He welcomed me like an old friend and I stayed for a fortnight, working alongside him. One of his pretty university assistants volunteered her services to warm my bed at night. She asked me to come back to Brisbane with her.

I said, "Maybe, first I have work to do for the rest of the year in Alice."

Of course I never went and the next year when I returned to repeat my visit another pretty student had taken her place and was equally friendly to me in the nights, though in her case there was a man of her own back in the city and I was not invited to meet him.

In the two years after Elin I found that there were two great solaces to my loneliness, the company of my mates and the warm body of a woman pressed against mine in the dark of the night. I did not count but there were many.

I found that at the end of the second year there was enough time and space in my mind to write the story of my Elfin Queen in my diary and that too was a solace from loneliness, to have captured a bit of her vanishing spirit on a permanent page, to be read and remembered again and again with the passing of time.

I was now just passing my thirtieth year, As I looked back at the last decade, beginning with me coming to the Middle East, and ending with my coming to a place of peace with my Elfin Queen. I felt I had come a long way from a callow youth who had aspired to walk in the footsteps of the Breaker. I could ride well, though I knew I was kidding myself if I thought I was in his class. Still it fed my ego when the odd person in the rodeo circuit compared me to him.

But much more important I had fathered a child who was well cared for and loved in a village where he belonged. That was better than what I had known and I was glad I could give him that. And I had loved two women who had loved me in return.

There had been many more of course, beginning with Betsy who had infatuated me with her body and her honey skin, but I had given her up of my own accord. This suggested, in looking back, that it had been a first love but not an all overwhelming one that possessed my soul. Then there had been many more women whose bodies I had known and had too loved in that passing way. But they were like ships that passed in the night, seen then gone, and whatever imprint their bodies had stamped on my soul had been fleeting to a moment of pleasure.

But there had been two that really mattered. The first had given her life without stint to ensure she gave the best chance to our future child. And I had done my best too to secure that same future, though not at such great cost. But still I had sent money to support his life and give him safety. When he was of an age I would give him a choice to return to Australia and live with me in as good a way as I could offer. Or he could choose to stay on with those who he knew and were his family too, if that was his choice.

I had loved that woman, Aisha, without stint. I would have given up anything I possessed, even my life to keep her alive to grow up with her son. But that choice

was never mine to make, instead my love of her required I let her go. All I could do was pray that she was in a better place and, perhaps, as the Paul Kelly song said, one day I would meet her up there in the air.

I did not know if it was true but I liked the thought.

Then there was Elin, my Elfin Queen. She was like a shooting star, unexpected, but so bright in her incandescence that she lit up the whole sky for a few brief moments. When I met her I knew we were kindred spirits in our wild, devil may care souls. We were both risk takers, seeking to go past horizons in our view to new places. I thought we would go to these places together, and for a short time we did, even though the journey was mostly in our imaginations, travelling like the Norse Gods of old in their small ships that went to all parts of the world. It was gloriously wonderful, but was over too soon. So now all I had was memories which at least I had written down in part in my diary to immortalise her passing like the legendary Vikings of old. And I had buried her with a boat for the trip, maybe not the best boat that ever sailed, but the best I could give her in that place.

Now, two years on, I must too let her go from my dreams and return to my solitary solace of loneliness. Her trip was not one I could share for now, but, like Aisha, I hoped I could meet her too in the air. Perhaps she and Aisha could dance together in this other place, each with a hand in mine.

It was now the two years anniversary of the night when Elin died. I sat in the desert as heat leaked out of a summer day into a clear night sky above.

I sat on the top of a sand hill far east of Alice Springs, looking towards a rising half-moon somewhere over the place where she lay.

As I watched another shooting star flashed bright across the sky as if to say, *'You have seen the last of my life force pass through the night sky, now look for me no more, for I am gone!'*

Chapter 27

Rich Beyond Measure.

With that night gone my mind was again clear and fully my own.

I thought now of all the wealth I had in those piles of stones, some stored near the mine east of Birdsville, some stored in a bank vault in Brisbane. It was time to turn them into real money. Eric had a notional half share but he was gone and I saw no value in sending it to a charity. Elin had a second notional half share of my part but she was gone, her family in Sweden was unknown and it seemed a mockery to send them a pile of money when I could not send their daughter home to see them again.

I thought of seeking them out to tell them of her brief passing, but what could I say, that she was buried in the desolate heart of Australia, because a mine we were digging together had fallen in on top of her. Part of my desire for the story not to be told was my guilt that I had not minded her better. But another and kinder

part was, that in the telling, I would extinguish whatever faint hope they held for her survival. That seemed crueller than not knowing.

So the secret was mine alone to keep. The photo on her passport was my sole reminder of her presence, it was an image I would keep to help preserve a remnant of that memory in my mind. If a time came when that share of her wealth served a useful purpose to her kin or her memory I would gladly pass it on, it was hers by right. But it needed to serve some purpose, not just be a pile of money to be frittered away. Perhaps one day I would build a thing like a real timber boat to sail those icy seas. Then I could place her passport in its timber frame and it would sail on to new waters for as long as the boat did.

After the night of the second shooting star I packed up my car and went back to the places we had shared together; breakfast in the Coober Pedy café, alone; lunch and a drink at the Maree pub, alone, night on the salt at the edge of the lake, alone; night at the Birdsville pub alone and finally a night at our old camp, alone. In the midnight hour sat in the middle of the stone circle. No sense of her ghost remained. In the morning I collected the hidden stones and went on to Brisbane where I sold them all through a large trader I knew for the best price I could get.

I kept no other mementos, the only one that mattered slept with her. When all the transactions were done there was a sum of more than ten million dollars sitting in my bank account from the proceeds, on top of my share of the previous million I had cashed, still largely untouched. It seemed a vast sum for which I had little use.

I consulted a couple lawyers and investment advisers and found one of each I liked and trusted. They arranged a series of investments to keep a steady increase in the value of what I owned; a mix of real estate, shares and other assets. I placed them in my real name of Vincent Mark Bassingham, and made out a will to my Uncle Antonio who lived in Brisbane and had been good to me as a child. I thought of finding him, but after all that had passed there seemed no point and it was best to leave that part of my past behind.

Along the way I bought two apartments for my own use, one in Alice Springs and one in Katherine. The one in Alice Springs I put in the name of Mark Bennet and that in Katherine in the name of Mark Butler, the two sets of identity papers which I had in use.

With 1200 kilometres between them they gave me two bases to live in and work from which I moved between depending on the season and what work I had on.

They were far enough apart so there was little overlap between the people I knew in both, and to everyone I went by the name MB or Mark, letting the surname slide away with comments like, I no longer use it, B will suffice. It was used for a handful of legal purposes but that was the limit.

Both apartments were two bedroom units in new complexes, comfortable but basic to live in. I put in just enough furnishings to make them liveable. They were not really homes, but bases from which to operate when I needed to be in a town and I was rarely in either for more than a couple nights at time. I also rented a post box for mail and bought an industrial shed in each town where I could keep things for my work I did not want to store where I lived.

My real home was my vehicle which I had set up for remote outback use, with long range fuel and water tanks and the other things I needed to survive and do

my regular work. I liked the freedom to come and go unhindered, to know that in five minutes I could be loaded and driving down the road from somewhere to nowhere, with no constraints. I kept a second identical backup vehicle in the shed in Katherine lest the first one had a major breakdown and swapped them from time to time, with an alternate set of plates for each in case I needed to do it on the fly without an identity change. I used a little metal box to keep my documents in and welded a space behind the spare wheel where I could keep it safely hidden out of sight. For safe keeping I put Elin's passport in with them. I did not want to explain its presence to anyone.

Occasionally I would go to a big town or city and treat myself to a few nights of comfort in an upmarket hotel or apartment. But none of these was my home and after a few days I would be ready to head out to the back of beyond again. While my life was solitary I had friends in many places who would welcome me for a beer or a chat. Vic was foremost amongst these but there were many others, stations owner and managers of the huge runs across the VRD and Barkly Tablelands, bush pub owners, miners in their remote camps, and others like me who made a living providing services across this Never Never land.

I knew I had wealth beyond measure, more than enough to retire on if the fancy took me. But I decided I liked my drifting way of life, moving from place to place as the fancy took me. And I did not want to become one of the lazy alcoholic soaks with not enough to do each day who littered the town and bush pubs of the land. So I would keep working and testing myself, pushing the limits. I had nothing I cared about to lose, so it seemed I could go on this way for ever, except that I needed something to challenge me beyond my comfort zone, to bring me back to a place of stark choices between living and dying when a split second decision mattered. I could feel a sort of bored apathy begin to creep into my soul, along with a hunger for things new and dangerous, life lived on the edge.

In this place I reread the Breaker's story. I got a sense that in his later years he had mastered everything he felt mattered, he could ride the horses they gave him better than any other, he could win the fights and races when he needed, he had enough money for his needs, and was feted for his words as a bush poet and his skills in the outback. But he never settled, he stayed a rolling stone, he drifted around from town to town, until one day when the challenge was issued he rode off to war, as much from a bored indifference as a burning desire to save king and country.

In a way that I had not understood before I was like him, I was a rolling stone too who needed a new challenge. I did not know what it was but I wanted it to come soon. In the meantime I would get on with my life of work in the day and women in the night. It was a good life if not enough.

One day I came to my place in Katherine to find a note in the letter box, addressed to Breaker MB and signed, '*Friend of Fred!*'

Apart from that signature there was only one line, '*Please meet me for a drink in your regular next Friday night.*'

I don't know why, but I knew this was the challenge I was waiting for.

Epilogue

My name is Susan. For a brief period I too was a lover of MB, one of many. I like to think he loved me and I loved him too without reservation, even though he died by my deliberate act. But that not the story which is told here. This story comes before that.

More than five years after he passed from my life and from the rest of the world, as his memory was gradually returning to me, I found a densely written notebook of about two hundred pages of his words. It came about as I gradually unravelled his affairs, as the main inheritor named within his will.

We were cleaning out his apartment in Alice Springs in preparation for its sale. It had been left vacant and unoccupied since he died. I found it was a depressing place, soulless, with almost no furnishings, inside just a single bed, a table and chairs and outside a small balcony with a rusty railing, the only item a single rusty chair. It was two floors up, looking out across to the MacDonalld Ranges. The view was wonderful even if the place was a hole.

The balcony wall was painted cement except for one place where a big book sized metal plate, painted the same colour as the cement, was attached to the wall with four rusty screws. I don't know why it attracted me, it may have been that most of the paint on the screws was missing and it looked like they had been undone on several occasions. There must have been more that drew me to see what lay behind this unremarkable plate.

Most likely I think it was a long repressed memory of another metal plate which hid a metal box which I had found over five years before. It held four girls passports. It was really this discovery that started me down the path to all the madness that followed. It had been originally hidden in a recess behind the spare wheel in this man's car. But a screw had been missing, opening the recess for me to put my hand in and find what lay behind. This time all the screws were still there, but yet.

But yet, there was clearly something behind here that had led to the screws being undone on multiple occasions. Bare metal and rust had taken the place where paint had once been. So it was like this odd little fact rang a bell of association in my brain. It caused me to find a screwdriver and take the plate off once more.

The plate covered a hole in the bricks underneath, just one brick was missing. I could see from old chisel marks in the residue of mortar that it had been taken out at some stage after the wall was built. An old notebook rested in this space, the type one buys at a better newsagent or bookshop, leather covered, an inch thick, eight inches long and four inches wide. It was longer and narrow than Mark's diary which I had seen many times. There was nothing written on the outside to indicate its purpose. My hands shook as I slid it out and flipped back the front cover.

Dense closed spaced writing crowded on the pages, looking as if it had been written carefully and in haste at the same time. It was writing I knew so well, from the depths of my memory, even though I had not seen it produced in the five

years. It was clearly a story or memoir of some sort, though it was not named as such. It began, "Breaker MB is a name some call me."

I knew of 'The Breaker' from the movie of that name. I wondered if it was a story that Mark had made up to while away the time. I had found a copy of a book about the real Breaker amongst his things in his Katherine apartment we had sold a few months before. It was well thumbed so it appeared to have been much read.

Curiosity piqued, I sat down on that rusty chair there and began to read.

Within two paragraphs I knew this was not some imaginary story; this was the story of his life, self-told, written in the hand of the man I knew as Mark Bennet, and other's had called other MB variants, Mark Brown, Mark Butler and so on.

I read on, I knew the man from both remnants of my memory of our time and what he had told me and from reading bits of his diary. It was soon clear that what I held here was similar in parts to what I had read before and yet also much more. It was an ordered record, told chronologically.

The other had been anecdotes and observations, mixed bits of mundane trivia, alongside his deep personal experiences. But his diary had been like paint splashed upon a page, pictures and patterns interspersed here and there with other details, parts of love and loss, parts of humour, but with no coherent narrative holding all the bits together. Time and place was often disjointed, chronology distorted, fact and fiction could merge. It was part of a heartfelt expression of a soul but it was not a story one could read, follow and understand how events unfolded.

This was the opposite, a single story thread running from start to finish, telling this man's story from the inside of his mind as he lived it. I knew at once I must read it, from beginning to end in the way, it was told. So I took this notebook to my home with me, sat in my most comfortable chair and read, undisturbed, from the first to the last word. It took me the best part of two days to get through the full transcript, and in that time I did nothing else, immersed in the life and the mind of the man I knew as Mark.

I had thought, at the start, the story would end with what he told at the start of his return to Australia, just before he met me. But as I approached the end of his writing it was clear that a large part of his story was not here. Had he run out of space and started another book, lost or buried in some other place, or did his writing flag and the second half never get written?

I think most likely it did and it remains hidden yet.

I searched wherever else I could think, I went through all the other things which had come to me and Vic as we sorted and sold off his things. I checked the sheds and other places and things he had owned. I even got permission from the new owners of his place in Katherine to check again there.

I talked to Alan, the policeman who investigated his death about the car he owned and whether it could have been left there. He did not think so, he told me how it had been systematically pulled apart at the police workshop, all the removable bits stripped out and then put on a hoist and every nook and cranny checked for anything which may be hidden. It was the main clue at that stage in a murder investigation after all. And apart from my lipstick and my DNA in a corner of the cooler box on the back they had found zip. However he traced the car for me and found it had been sold to an aboriginal community. In due course it was

drowned in in a river and it had then gone to a wrecker for parts and those parts had been dispersed to the four corners of Australia. So looking further there was a dead end.

I checked with everyone else I knew who had dealings with Mark lest a second notebook had been left in some other obscure place, but everything came back a zero.

I am still not prepared to totally give up on its existence but I have run out of ideas. Plus I fear that, if more of his story is every found, the second half, it will be much darker and more confronting. From the little we have gleaned from his diary some of what happened at the end was very bad, for him and others, not that this book is a bundle of joy. But where he ends what was written in this notebook one feels a thread of hope that after this his life may go better. So perhaps it is the right place to end it here after all, at the place where the writing in this notebook ceased.

So this is all you get of the story of Mark. I have published it under the pseudonym, Breaker MB as it seemed to give him pleasure when he was called this. And the name does capture part of the extraordinary ability as a horseman he was gifted with. I saw a little, Vic and Buck saw more and from time to time I hear another story which has come to me after being passed, word of mouth, from campfire to campfire around the outback.

So it pleases me to have him share in this legend. He himself says he was but a poor imitation of the original. I am not so sure, I think if we stood them side by side and then sat them side by side on two horses, the resemblance would be much stronger. If there is such a thing as re-incarnation perhaps it is true that part of the spirit of the one was carried forward in the other. It is a good thought to end on, two men of the outback, each with their parts both good and bad, and how legends that have grown around them.

So I have given you Marks story as I transcribed it. It is just his words, barely edited. You can make of it what you will.

I have called it Part One. There is more of his story untold. I suspect he may have been writing a second part to finish it in the time after I met him. If that is so I am sure it is out there somewhere.

If I remember anything clearly about him it was his intensity of purpose. He did not do things by halves and he did not leave things half finished.

So I hope you enjoy reading the part he has given us. It was not mine to hold it back despite the pain that parts may bring. In the meantime I live in hope that one day I will discover the second part, carefully hidden and preserved while it waits for someone to find it. Perhaps the finder will be another fisherman like Charlie, I will ask him to look.

And for those who want to know the rest of the story that follows: buy yourself a copy of the five books in the Crocodile Dreaming Series, for which we can mostly thank my best friend Anne.

Good reading to you all!

Susan.

[NOTE: The name of „Alima“ was changed to the non-local name „Aisha“ later in the story.]

