



Sometimes fate leads you
down a strange path

EXCLUSIVE
EXTRACT

Elsa Goody
Bushranger

DARRY FRASER

BESTSELLING AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR

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First Published 2020
First Australian Paperback Edition 2020
ISBN 9781489272171

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Published by

Mira

An imprint of Harlequin Enterprises (Australia) Pty Limited (ABN 47 001 180 918), a subsidiary of

HarperCollins Publishers Australia Pty Limited (ABN 36 009 913 517)

Level 13, 201 Elizabeth St

SYDNEY NSW 2000

AUSTRALIA

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia
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Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

One

Robe, 1896

My brother is dead.

The bold, confident script swum before her eyes and Elsa Goody dropped the page onto her lap. She took in deep silent breaths until the taut pain eased in her chest. Finally lifting the letter again, its words weighty, she angled it towards the candle and read to her dying father. Her voice shook as if unused to speech.

'To Mr Goody, Goody Farm near Robe, In the Colony of South Australia.

'Dear Mr Goody, it is with regret I write to tell you that I have, today, buried your son, George. He has died this morning.'

These words from a stranger—this Mr Ezekiel Jones—carefully scribed, were impossible to absorb, to comprehend. How could her brother be dead? And—*where?* In Casterton. The place was fully three days' ride from here, in another colony.

George. Her eyes closed a moment and the picture of him was clear. Wild, wavy hair, the colour of stringy-bark honey, framed a pale face under dark amber eyebrows—like their mother once had, like Elsa's own. His small nose and luminous green eyes were

also just like hers. How alike they'd been when they were young children, especially when he'd lopped off her long tresses—with the shears—which then resembled his own much shorter mess. She should've been more wary of her twelve-year-old brother when he'd come back from the shed, hands behind his back and a peculiar look on his face. His strike had been swift and wickedly gleeful, and suddenly there lay ten years' growth, the tight bundle of thick curls lifeless on the ground. She'd belted after him, not able to run him down as he charged across the home paddock laughing himself silly. The little devil had nearly got away with it too, telling Pa that she'd done it herself.

Their other three siblings, two dead and only Rosie left, had not looked like their mother at all. Now that beloved George was dead, there was no one around to remind her of her mother, Kitty, who'd died long ... Where was the locket with her mother's likeness in it? Tucked safely inside Elsa's cherished keepsake was a curl of her Ma's soft deep golden-brown hair. *Oh, now's not the time to wonder where it is.*

She stared at the letter, her vision blurred until she blinked and took a breath. It had been so kindly written by Mr Jones, and from so far away that she should give it her full attention. It had come from a farm outside Casterton, in the Western Districts of Victoria. *Gracious me, George had got all the way there on his adventure.* The date on the letter told her that he'd died almost two weeks ago. *What was I doing around here on that day? Why didn't I feel something strange or telling?* She couldn't remember. She'd have been doing her usual chores—trying to coax the vegetables to grow, or re-aligning that fallen fence-post, and digging it deeper into unforgiving earth. Maybe she'd been chopping wood. Nothing unusual.

Tears hadn't come when she'd first read the letter. Collecting it from the post office in town earlier today, she'd opened it

as she walked the couple of miles back to the house, the faraway postmark had been a mystery she couldn't resist. After that, it had been a walk home from hell.

Still no tears, even now, after reading it to her father. Anyway, this was not the time for her tears. There was much to do about this, but for the life of her, she couldn't think of what right now.

She folded the page in her lap and looked at her pa. Propped up in his bed with all of their meagre pillows stuffed in behind him, Curtis Goody remained silent. His drawn features were shut beneath his lank white hair, the dark blond of his youth completely gone. Where had he vanished to, her father? So few years ago he was vital, strong and alive. Perhaps all the deaths, his wife, his sons, had left a gaping wound that finally sapped his life.

He stared across the dim room that was the sum of their house. 'Read the line again where he talks of regret,' he said, and shifted under the blanket draped around his bony shoulders. Perhaps he could feel the night-time chill beginning to settle in but she had nothing else to keep him warm.

Holding the candle closer and unfolding the letter, she cleared her throat. '*... it is with regret I write to tell you that I have, today, buried your son, George.*'

Nothing but the chirrup of birds calling before they took to their nests for the night filled the silence. The little flame flickered and, worried her gulping breath would blow it out, she dropped the letter again. Cupping the wick with her hand to guard it, the flame steadied on the tiny piece of wax. There were only a couple of candles remaining in the house, so she'd have to hurry to make some more—although with what, she didn't know.

A murmur came from her father yet she heard the words, the deeply borne grief, as loudly as if they'd been shouted in her ears. 'My son, my last son. My fault. I let him go wanderin'.'

Alarmed, she said, 'I'm sure not, Pa.'

‘Oh yes, oh yes,’ he cried softly—his breath troubled by illness and bereavement. ‘Too easy on him.’

The letter remained on her knees as she carefully set the candle down on a sturdy little stool that served as a bedside table. When they still had their cow, it had been their milking stool. Now the cow was gone, there was no milk to churn for butter. No butter, no money. Their whole farming enterprise, sheep mainly and a few cows had whittled down to that last old girl once her father became too ill to manage.

Strangely, she thought about that cow now, about when it had delivered its first calf. The baby bull was born dead. Its mother had stood over it for hours, cleaning it and trying to encourage it to life. Only when she finally plodded away, lowing mournfully, accepting her baby was dead, did Elsa find George and have him help take the small body away. George buried their dead animals; he said it respected them. She’d understood, or thought she had, but her siblings had thought it senseless. Their father had indulged him.

When the cow had been ready to calve the next time, Elsa was more prepared. Old Mr Conroy, a bullocky, had told her about lathering soap over a person’s hands and arms, which helped to ease them inside the birth canal to grab the calf. Despite the massive contractions, and the calf slurping back in, Elsa had managed to pull the infant heifer into the world. She’d stayed with the baby, and watched as the cow hovered, waiting anxiously until the poddy could stand on wobbly little legs to take her first drink.

Elsa missed that cow. Missed the calf who’d been sold when it was old enough for market. How many times had she nursed both mother and baby—clearing feeding problems, massaging teats to milk, cleaning their makeshift stall, keeping watch for wild dogs, stitching cuts to the mother and calf when they’d stampeded over a rotting fence.

She'd done a lot of stitching, of her brothers' wounds, too, as well as tending to animal births and helping to build fences, and clear the well, and keep the cartwheels oiled, and the leather goods pliable, and—

Oh, goodness. Stop. She couldn't help wanting to escape the reality of George's death. She so missed her brothers ... how big and boisterous the family would become when they all got together. Rosie was never much fun, and she seldom even visited. She was always glum and snappy, so when the older boys had died, Elsa had clung to George until he'd left home. Now he was dead too. No more big family, no more siblings to laugh with, to wrestle, to belong ...

A breeze crept in between the timbers of the walls, its crisp, sly tendrils mocking her. She'd have to mix some pug—clay and straw—find the gaps and fill them. *Another chore.* After her mother had died, her father never finished the stone house he and the boys were building, so the timber hut with its clay fillers was all they had. Kitty was missed, such a force in their lives. Cheery, Elsa remembered, and fun, and her lean arms would hug hard and make the breath whoosh out of you. And she loved Pa. Her hands would cup his face and she'd plant a kiss on his mouth—*right in front of us.* He loved it; he loved her. No wonder the life started to leave Pa when Ma went.

Elsa grasped her father's hand, its large and nobbly-knuckled fingers cool and dry. She leaned in. 'There's more in the letter, Pa.' She edged closer to the candle and held the paper near the flickering light.

Concentrating on the letter, she found the script looked as if done by a firm hand, assured of its task. Elsa imagined the hand had hesitated, but once decided, the words had flowed, and the page had been filled with elegant prose for their loss.

Glancing at the flourish of Ezekiel Jones's signature, she wondered about his name. Not often heard these days, biblical and—

'Go on,' her father rasped.

She collected herself and continued reading aloud. *'He has died this morning. He lies by a great eucalypt on my land, a place of peace and comfort, and he faces the colony of his birth. He was brought to me for help after injuries inflicted by bushrangers in the district, but alas, his wounds were too great, and he succumbed to merciful death.'*

Bushrangers, Elsa thought. *Good Lord, in this day and age.* She kept her head bowed, felt a distance as if all this was happening to someone else. The letter was a thoughtful missive to strangers—compassionate, sincere, and the writer must have known the family would suffer immeasurable loss upon reading it. It seemed to her that he was reaching out to say he shared their sorrow. The lump in her throat grew. His words warmed her, as if his gentle hand had settled on her shoulder, sharing some of the burden of hurt.

Curtis Goody took in a long noisy breath. 'He was impetuous, that boy, and he thought nothing could stop him.' He withdrew his hand from hers. 'First our John by snakebite, then our Ned by fever. And now our George ...' He tapped her hand and she looked up. 'We didn't find the snake that killed our John, we couldn't fight the fever that killed our Ned, but—' He beat a fist weakly on his chest, his mouth a grimace. 'If I were a well man and not dyin' myself, I'd go after those bushrangers for killin' our George.' A lone tear rolled down his cheek.

Elsa took his veiny hand and laid it down. 'Rest a bit, Pa.'

'My sons. All gone. And I don't have the fight left in me.'

Her pa would hate anyone to see that tear, but as she was only his daughter, it wouldn't matter. *Only his daughter, not one of his sons.* She cut off that thought. Elsa reached over and with the edge of her pinny dabbed at his face to wipe the tear, ignoring that he'd alluded to his own impending death. On one of the few

visits from the doctor the family could afford, they were told that his illness was most probably in the organ called the pancreas and not curable. Dr Wilson had left sleeping draughts, no doubt powerful tinctures against deep and burrowing pain. Elsa glanced at the little glass bottle by the bed. It wouldn't be the right thing to administer another dose now, so close to the last one, even to help ease her father's heartache—grief would only bide its time anyway, so it might as well be faced now. Besides, she knew she had to be careful with the doses. The doctor did say that at this stage in her father's illness she could use too much. Her hand hovered over the bottle. She withdrew sharply.

Breathing deeply, she said, 'I should write back to Mr Jones to thank him.'

'Aye. Would be the right thing. Perhaps our George left some possessions.'

Elsa nodded, although thought that would have been odd of her brother, and Mr Jones hadn't mentioned anything. George had only the clothes on his back. She said, 'Tomorrow, I'll go into the town and tell our Rosie.'

'Your sister will be terrible afflicted by this news.'

'She will,' Elsa agreed. *As I am terrible afflicted.* But her sister would soon forget her grief with the promise of the farm coming to her and her husband now. Rosie was older and had married at sixteen, in the year Elsa was born. When the fortunes of the town were growing, Rosie and her husband had done well as bakers. Now Robe was in decline, and folk had left in droves, leaving only a small population trying to eke out a living in the South Australian coastal town. Once a thriving port but now in competition with stronger rivals, it was a shell of its former self—a beautiful shell, with many grand and stately, but empty, buildings.

The port was one thing; the farms struggled too. Not that her father owned much land, but with the boys gone—the last of her

brothers, that scallywag George, had refused to work the farm—Elsa's future now looked bleak. She didn't believe for one minute that she would feature in her sister's plans.

Elsa could almost hear what her father was thinking. His eyes were closed, his jaw was set, and his breathing was now measured. He pulled the blanket a little tighter around himself.

'You must bring Rosie home, here,' he said, an urgency in his tone. 'I must speak with her, first. Frank is the only man in the family now, but I don't want Frank to ...' His voice drifted off. He frowned, his eyes averted from Elsa's.

Frank, Rosie's husband. A puffed-up lardy ball if ever there was one, in body—Elsa was sure he ate much of their bakery's profits—and in soul. She couldn't understand her sister ever having taken to a man who strutted about the town hardly doing a thing, while his wife worked down to her bones, sweltering in front of the wood-fired ovens for the best part of every morning, after kneading and shaping loaves and buns in the hours prior. Rosie had lamented over the years that she hadn't had any babies and wondered if she'd worked too hard for her body to bear children. It'd been a while since Elsa had heard her sister's laments.

And that husband of hers is so lazy, it's a wonder Rosie thought she could possibly become—Again, Elsa stopped those thoughts. Not her business why they hadn't had children. Rosie was getting on in years now. She'd be over forty this year—she could easily have been Elsa's mother although she didn't look like their mother. She had their father's features. A narrow face (that could turn too sharp once she put on that determined, bossy pose), a long nose and a strong chin. Her hair was a paler shade than Elsa's, much subdued compared to Elsa's rich and wild mane, and not likely to attract attention. Rosie's brown eyes appeared, to others, to warm toward folk. Elsa had found that bemusing when she heard talk of it. Rosie—warm? But whatever her thoughts of her

sister and brother-in-law, one was insistent and clear: Frank did not inspire her confidence.

She leaned towards her father to whisper, 'I'll bring her. But Frank doesn't have to do anything for you, Pa. I can administer if you name me in a legal paper. You know the laws have changed.'

By the look on his face, if he could have harrumphed, he would have. Mr Curtis Goody had been unimpressed by laws regarding property changing in favour of married women, and allowing women to have the vote in South Australia. 'Slip of a thing like you,' he grumbled but not unkindly. 'You're the youngest, my farm girl. Better that you marry Pete Southie and not get Frank offside any longer.'

'Pa, I'm not a slip of a thing. And you know why I would never marry Mr Southie. He's an awful creature.'

'Now, I'm sure he's not as bad as you say,' her father wheezed. 'I'm sure the man didn't mean to bump into you like that.' His hand, with its thin and dry skin rested on top of hers and patted absently.

Her father's memory was still sharp. Pete Southie had been making a pest of himself when Elsa had refused to acknowledge him. One day not long ago, he'd stalked right into the house, pressed his suit for her, offered marriage and then he'd *pressed* himself on her. When she complained loudly and with a crack of her dustpan on his head, Southie had claimed that his enthusiastic attention was an accident.

Enthusiastic? Accident? Did the man think her a fool? She had in no uncertain terms told him what she'd thought of his enthusiasm. While he'd controlled his zeal from then on, it was the leery grin he'd give her whenever she'd seen him since that set her teeth grinding. She should've crowned him more than once with the dustpan.

'Besides, Elsa, he is a friend of Frank's. It might benefit if you marry.' Her father was nearly out of breath. 'To keep this land,

you girls have to ...' His voice drifted off again and in the silence that followed, she soon heard a soft snore.

Bah, Frank. Elsa knew she had no chance to change her father's mind. Never did have, really. As long as there were men in the family, her father was convinced that she'd be looked after. She wasn't about to be allowed to administer anything, much less something as important as The Property. Of course, with three older brothers, what were the chances she'd ever have been considered anyway? She shrugged. There was no use fighting for it, not within her family anyway, *what was left of it*—her voice would still not be heard. Well, she'd always made it heard but would be ignored.

There was a light shining though, despite the grief. She would have a voice in the upcoming elections this year. Very soon, in April, women in South Australia would have a vote. The colony was the first place in the country where women were legally about to vote—including Aboriginal women. It will be wonderful. *Such excitement.* And that same day the country would have its first referendum as well: should laws change to allow the introduction of religious education into state schools?

Oh, it would be a grand thing. Elsa was glad the polling booths would be in Robe township at the council offices, not the old and draughty Courthouse; previous polls had been conducted there and complaints were loud. The candle's flame flickered as another, more erratic, breeze blew through. *Be careful, Elsa.* She cupped the flame to steady it.

The voting business was all very well—and of course she felt invested—but there was much else to consider right now. With her last brother gone, how could she possibly work the farm on her own? *Oh, George.*

Would things be better if she'd married and had lots of children and made her own big boisterous family? Apart from Pete

Southie, only one other man had offered. She'd sent both roundly on their way. Oh, there was young Henry Benson who had her heart a-flutter at odd times like when he'd smile at her as she walked past his father's forge, or when he'd stand too close if they were ever in the bakery at the same time, waiting for yesterday's items that had been reduced. He was too young, only nineteen, and it always made her feel foolish, that reaction of hers to him. Was it time to review? After all, she was getting on now too. At twenty-four, she knew she risked being overlooked in the marriage stakes.

What if marriage was indeed the only way she could keep the land?

Disgusted with herself that the thought had even entered her mind—it'd be like selling her soul—she looked down at the letter again. The candlelight wavered and threatened to extinguish. The signature leapt up as if dancing under the sputtering flame. *Ezekiel Jones*. To have buried her brother, her dear George, in a place of peace and comfort, he must be such a kind and loving man.

Unexplained warmth settled in her.

Two

Zeke Jones watched his eldest, Gifford, walk the horse down the track. It was maybe five miles from his sheep and wheat farm to the little school in Casterton. While at nine years of age, Giff was capable of the walk, his younger siblings, Gracie at eight, and Jonty at six would struggle. So they were both atop the bare-back Milo, a gentle tan-coloured gelding. The horse would wait patiently at the school with the few other horses that would have delivered children who lived far away. Later in the afternoon he would plod home over the flat paddocks then take the rise over the low hill and down to Zeke's gate, returning with his charges.

Three dogs, all black-and-tan male kelpies—Itch, Scratch and Zeke's brother Jude's dog, Bizzy—danced around their feet, barking and yipping their excitement. Zeke allowed the dogs out of their pen to see the kids off for school. The only other times they roamed free were when they worked the sheep, or when Giff had to give them a run. His kids loved them, but Zeke was not giving the dogs a soft life. Casterton had been producing fine litters of this new breed, small in stature and big on personality. They were bred as working dogs, and their reputation was growing.

The kids would be home again at last light or so. It was now about seven in the morning, Zeke reckoned. There was much to do, and a few remaining sheep to sell off; the day would go fast. He'd long been hearing of the bonuses the government offered for butter and cheese factories in the colony, so that meant dairy cows were in demand. New infrastructure and the money to pay for it would be needed if he sold out of sheep altogether. Hoping he might've somehow missed tallying by a hundred pounds or so, he'd check his sums. He'd stocktake his milled timber again but he knew he only had enough to fence another small yard. When his older brother Jude came back, he'd discuss combining their holdings once more. Zeke could use his input, financial and physical ... if only Jude were willing, and able.

As he waited for the kids to get to the gate, he checked the sky. Light scudding clouds skimmed a high breeze. A darker billow above them hinted at rain. *Season's changing, the mornings are cooler. Time to get on with it.*

The kids yelled goodbye, waved at him, and Milo plodded away with them. The three dogs turned for home and suddenly alert, they tore into a gallop back towards the house, charging past him. Following, his mind on his ledger, he stopped short. 'Jesus, Nebo. Do you have to sneak up on a man?' The dogs had crowded around his younger brother who lounged on the verandah post.

Nebo bent to rough-house the dogs. 'You said to wait until after your brood had gone off to get their education for the day, so here I am.' He pushed off the post, ignored the dogs barking. 'A herd of roarin' bulls could've crept up on you the way you were daydreamin' into the sunshine after your kids.'

Zeke flicked a wrist. 'Boys, away,' he snapped, and in silence the dogs trotted off, ears sharp, tails wagging. He'd tie them up as soon as he got rid of his brother.

At forty-one, Nebo Jones was older by three years. Lean and rangy like Zeke, close enough in height, dark haired and dark eyed, they'd often been mistaken for one another—in their chequered past, that had been a problem for Zeke. He was a little sturdier around the chest than Nebo but not by much. Nebo had more angular features, and when vexed he could be gaunt. Haunted was the word Zeke mostly used to describe his troubled brother. Today, he looked more relaxed.

'Did you bring it?' he asked Nebo and pushed past him into the house.

'Could do with tea and a plate of eggs,' Nebo said, following through the house and outside to the kitchen. Once inside, he slapped a packet wrapped in newspaper onto the table.

Zeke turned to stoke the oven. 'We'll eat quick. I have work to do.' He shook the kettle, checking for enough water and put it on the cooker. Glancing behind at the packet, he said, 'Is that all it is?'

'He was a lone boy, Ezie,' Nebo said, a smirk lighting his face. He knew it irked Zeke to be called by his childhood nickname. 'Didn't have much on him but a locket with a snip of hair, a handkerchief and three spare buttons.' He pointed at the parcel. 'All there, as requested.'

'Surprised it is all there, knowing you.' Zeke said.

Nebo pulled a chair away from the table and sat, legs stretched out, crossed at the ankles. Any closer to Zeke and he'd be in the way, which was probably his intention. 'Nothing of value in it, nothin' to interest me. The boys reckoned I shoulda chucked it away.' The 'boys' were Nebo's no-hoper mates who lived with their women in the bush. Small-time thieves, some said. 'When you told me you'd written to his family, seemed only proper to bring it in.'

Zeke pulled a small basket from the mantel and took out eight eggs. He cracked them, dropped the contents into a bowl and

tossed the shells into a bucket. Jonty's hens had performed well. At least something was still working in the right direction on his place. 'Proper? Good of you. A bushranger, out of time and place, brings in a dead boy's only trinkets. Must have a heart after all.'

Nebo rubbed his face with one hand. Zeke could hear the rough scratch of it, thought of his own unshaven face. He never could come at the great beards some of his friends had grown; too many times had he seen their dinner stuck in their whiskers. Or worse, yesterday's dinner.

Maybe Nebo should grow the beard since he called himself a bushranger—that way no one would mistake him, the clean-shaven brother, Zeke, for being a petty thief.

'At least I'm not a reformed bushranger,' Nebo said. 'Nothin' sorrier in my opinion.'

Zeke snorted but didn't take the bait. He'd never been a thief, just known to stick up for his wayward brother. And that had got him into plenty trouble because whenever it happened, it never happened softly.

Nebo frowned. 'I don't care to be shooting lads, you oughta know that. I told you it wasn't me, or mine. I got a feelin' that lazy slob Billy Watson mighta known something, but even when I gave him a roughin' up, he still never said. I just sent him on his way.'

'Billy Watson?'

'That no-hoper tub of useless thinks he's Billy the Kid.'

'You think he had something to do with this boy's shooting?'

Nebo shrugged. 'Damned if I know. But the poor kid was in a sorry state when I found him, and I just wanted to get him help. God knows, none of us want anyone dyin' on Jude's place again.'

Zeke glanced at him. Not like Nebo to show he cared much about anything except himself.

'If it was Watson,' Nebo said. 'I didn't want him comin' back for another go but it's got me stumped why he'd be on Jude's,

anyway. He knows there's nothin' there.' He let out a long breath. 'The boy's dead, and I made sure he got a decent burial here.'

'You could have buried him out in the scrub,' Zeke said, then thought of the boy's family. He wondered if his letter had got to them. George had said he had a father, and two sisters. He grabbed a heavy iron pan and sat it on the stovetop. He spooned lard into it, watched it melt and sizzle, then poured in the eggs.

'Cept he wasn't dead then, was he?' Nebo said. 'And I wasn't gonna wait for him to die out there, either. I knew you'd honour the lad, Ezie, is why I brought him here.' There was no smirk on his face, nor in his voice. Nebo had carried George onto Zeke's verandah, yelling for help. He waited with George still in his arms (who was sobbing a sister's name, Nebo told him later) while Zeke and his daughter Gracie hurriedly made a bed inside for the near-dead lad. 'And you buried him close by Maisie and your other little fella so I knew that's exactly what you did.'

Zeke let that go. He wasn't about to get into that old conversation—argument—with his brother about anything to do with Maisie, Zeke's dead wife. Any mention of their last child who'd survived birth by only days still tugged at his heart. He had to let that go, too.

He pushed the eggs around with a large wooden spoon. Reaching up to the mantel again he drew down a cloth-wrapped bundle and threw it on the table in front of his brother. 'Here, cut some bread.'

'You're a real homebody, bakin' bread and all. Bet you got those kids of yours doing all the chores, the laundry and such. If you get them runnin' this place, you can come to work with me. Better pay.' When Zeke gave him a look, Nebo said, 'All right, if not that, Mrs Hartman next door would take them. She's been on her own a while now, an' getting' on. She's everyone's granny.'

Mrs Hartman was only a few years older than they were, maybe their older brother Jude's age. What would that make her—around forty-five or forty-six? Zeke didn't bother responding.

Nebo tore off chunks of bread, still warm from the cooker this morning. 'What'll you do with that?' he asked pointing at the newspaper-wrapped packet.

'Might wait a while, see if I hear anything from the family.'

'You could just send it on to that same address, anyhow, couldn't you? Pity I never got it to you before you mailed the letter.'

Zeke stopped stirring eggs and stared at his brother. 'Yeah, pity you never got it to me when you landed a near-dead boy on my doorstep.'

'I found it *after*, by accident, when I went back to Jude's place, just to check. I swear.'

Jude's place was all but abandoned. Judah Jones had lost Anne, his wife, and two daughters to diphtheria nearly five years ago and he'd been roaming around the colony since. He'd come back every so often; Zeke imagined that it was to see if he could bear to stay again, but he never did. Nebo and Zeke looked in on the place from time to time, and the last time Nebo had been there, he found the badly injured lad and had brought him here.

'Check for what?' Zeke asked.

'For who'd done this to him, left him for dead. Might've been some clue. Maybe Billy-bloody-Watson left something behind—if it was him. The kid mighta thrown away other possessions, trying to hide them when he maybe seen someone comin'.'

There was a moment's silence when Zeke stared at his brother, searching for answers. 'Well, wouldn't have been Jude who shot him.'

'It wouldn't have. Unless he's really out of his head now.'

'So, that locket must've meant something to the boy. You don't carry a locket with a picture of a lady in it, and a lock of hair,

unless it means something to you. As for mailing it, I trust a letter in the post. I don't trust a packet of jewellery in the post.' He continued with the eggs as they crackled and spat in the pan.

'Jewellery.' Nebo barked a laugh. 'If it was valuable, you wouldn't have it, I'd have sold it. It's nothing more than cheap stuff, sentimental at best.' He tapped his fingers on the table.

'Aye. That's right. You checked it over first,' Zeke said, a curl on his lip. 'Then old *sentimental* you gave it back to him. After he died.'

'*Bah*. I'm glad not to be stuck with it. You forget I'm not a soft-heart like you.'

Zeke grunted. 'Like I believe that,' he said. 'You bring me the boy, then his treasures instead of throwing them away, even though they're worthless. If that's not soft-heart, what is?' He threw a pinch of salt into the pot and stirred. 'Poor kid was just too far gone for me to save him.'

Nebo looked a little uncomfortable. 'It was late when I found him.' He sat up, cleared his throat. 'Anyway, looks like Billy Watson has gone to the troopers.'

'About the boy?' Zeke scooped some eggs onto a plate and slid it across to his brother. He scraped the rest out for himself and then landed the empty pan with a clatter onto a bench—a thick piece of sawn timber. The hot pan seared it, and wisps of smoke arose. He sat down to eat.

'That and other things.' Nebo loaded bread with eggs and took a bite.

Zeke's own chunk of laden bread hung in the air as he looked up. 'You can get right back on that horse of yours—wherever you've left him—and get the hell off my place. The last time there was "that and other things" the troopers came and threatened me and the kids if I didn't give you up.'

'They were just tryin' to rattle you. You didn't tell 'em where I was.'

‘Trust me, only because I didn’t know.’

‘You wouldna done it.’ Nebo stood and took the boiling kettle off the stove. He poured water into a teapot, threw in a handful of tea leaves from a tin he found on the mantel. ‘But I’m surprised they haven’t got you watched again already.’

Zeke squinted at his brother. ‘You’d know. I bet you’ve been watching this place for days.’

‘True. No troopers around.’ Nebo set the teapot down on the table.

‘What’ve you done this time—“that and other things”?’

‘I had to do him over a bit.’ He held up his hands before Zeke could yell. ‘Not the kid you buried. Watson. He’s not so smart. Just gave him a roughin’ up like I said before, just a tickle, but I heard he ran straight to the troopers so we had to move camp to be careful. The police are gettin’ more interested—’

‘You’re outlawed then?’ Zeke frowned at him.

‘Nup, no warrants against me. And until I’m so named, no man can legally shoot to kill me. Not the police or any other bastard. I’m just a pest but I’m not outside the law.’

The *Felons Apprehension Act 1878* made it possible for anyone to shoot and kill declared outlaws—no need to arrest them, no need for a trial. Zeke figured Nebo knew how close to the wire he could run.

‘But they can still shoot you.’

‘Not to kill me. I’m safe.’

‘Jesus, you’re a fool. Shot is shot. Dead is dead. They’ll name you an outlaw, anyway, in due course.’

Nebo waved him away. ‘I’m not that important. Been no real bushrangers since Ned Kelly, poor bastard. Too many settlers around; too many police now. I just steal a sheep here and there, just for a feed. Get a laugh out of taking the wind out of some blow-hard’s sails ... But then, I’ll tell you this, one of my boys

took Scotty's missus off his hands, and that caused a ruckus.' He shrugged as if to say *what could I do?*

'*What?* He kidnapped a woman?'

'No, Ezie, he didn't kidnap anyone. What in God's name d'ye take us for, pirates? If I find any nasty arsehole takin' a woman by force, I'll put him away without a backwards glance.'

Their mother, *and* their father, God rest their souls, had instilled a respect in all their boys for any women in their lives. Zeke knew that Nebo had spoken the truth, but anything else was fair game. Still, he mocked his brother. 'You—the big, bad bushranger.'

'I steal sheep, I said, a cow maybe. But I don't steal women. Whoever heard of that this day an' age?' He shifted in his seat, looked a bit uncomfortable. 'Any of mine goes there and I'll kill 'em.'

'You couldn't kill anybody.'

Nebo shrugged. 'You never know.'

'I do know.'

'Just let me tell the story, will yer? It wasn't kidnap at all. It seems the young lady herself, Mrs Tillie Scott, took a shine to my boy Glen Barton—'

'Barton? He did kill someone, though, didn't he?'

'*Jesus*, Ezie. Yeah, Barton. And it was self-defence, witnesses and all.'

'Ah, and that's why he hides out in the scrub, then.'

'Fer crissakes, leave off. So, while Scotty himself was away hiding his end in someone else, Tillie asked Barton to come get her, and he did. So Scotty gets all funny on it, prob'ly more because Tillie took her horse Salty with her. You know the one? Bloody brilliant little gelding won at the races last year.'

Zeke was busy eating now and didn't look up. He knew the horse.

'That was the thing that made us move again. We'll keep our heads down for a while. Troopers will forget all about the other

stuff.' Nebo went on, 'We got quite the society happening in our bush camp, hidin' in the scrub. All the boys each have a little woman.'

Zeke nodded. 'Impressive. A real Robin Hood and his merry men. Haven't come across a Maid Marion for yourself yet?' When there was no quickfire response from Nebo, he could've kicked himself: he'd just done what he'd tried to avoid—opened a conversation he was sick of having.

Nebo's frown appeared, furrowing an already lined forehead. 'You had the only Maid Marion for me.'

'Don't start.' Zeke pushed his plate away. 'You're forgetting about poor Henrietta Porter. Henny was a real loyal one, and you barely gave her the time of day.'

'She wasn't Maisie. *I* saw Maisie before she latched eyes on you.'

Zeke slammed an open palm on the table. 'Maisie wasn't for you. Don't goad me, Nebo. Henny hung around waiting for you to stop chasing *my wife*.'

'Well, she didn't wait too long,' Nebo said, ignoring the vehemence in his brother.

'I reckon six years was long enough. And by then Maisie was already dead and still you—'

'Now, you stop,' Nebo yelled and bounced a fist off the timber table as he shoved out of his chair. He paced to the door and back, pointing a finger. 'You dunno anything about anything.'

'I know plenty.' Zeke had had enough. 'Tell me what it is you want and then get the hell out. I got work to do. Not wasting any more of the day, going over ancient history. Again.'

Nebo rubbed his nose, scratched his chin: all signs that he was trying to hold onto his temper. 'Don't want anything. Just came for a visit, brought that packet. But now you're asking, I do have something to tell you. It'll mean you're in it whether you like it

or not. Cobb & Co's coach is coming right by here next week, travelling from Mt Gambier to Casterton. Still gotta make good some details, like where and when to stop it, but it's said there's rich folk on board.'

'I'm not bailing up Cobb & Co, or anything else. Besides, coaches are giving way to railways. Rich folk travel by rail.'

Nebo cocked his head agreeing, but said, 'Rail don't go everywhere yet. The spoils would help you out, too.'

'I don't need that kind of help.'

'You used to enjoy yourself.'

'Getting you out of trouble? I don't think so.' Zeke eyed his brother. 'You'll end up killed, doing a hold-up. Get a job like the rest of us.'

'A job. You call this a job, what—this farm? There isn't enough land to do anything with and you know it. How many sheep can you run?'

'If your boys hadn't been stealing them—'

'My boys weren't stealin' from you. I'm sure of it, I'm tellin' you.'

Zeke shook his head. 'I don't want anything to do with any hold-up. I don't want to know about it. I don't want to see you back here talking about it. You're a risk to my kids.'

Nebo nodded, all too agreeable now. 'Ah yes, your kids. How are they? How is the little tacker, Jonty? Always had a soft spot for him.'

Zeke should've known that was coming. His brother had been angling for something the whole time, as was his way. He felt the pressure build, deep in his gut. His blood had seemed to heat faster in days gone by, a rapid boiling that threatened to spill, sometimes had. And it was fierce when it did. He'd always been the fiery one of the three brothers, always the one whom people kept on the good side, whom they knew to steer clear of. By now, he'd learned to beat down the flare of blind rage.

Nebo lifted his chin, still goading. 'He has the strong look of both his parents, boyo.' He threw the contents of his tea out onto the dirt outside. 'So we'll never know, will we? Can never tell what some of the ladies get up to.' He tossed the empty pannikin at his brother—the smirk on his face souring—ducked into the doorway and left.

Zeke let the cup clatter past him as Nebo disappeared from his sight. He heard the dogs barking, and Nebo's snarl at them to shut up.

Jonty was Maisie and Zeke's child. But the boy had a strong resemblance to his uncle Nebo, more than Zeke's other two children did. Nebo always made it sound as if Maisie had at some later stage hankered after him, that maybe she'd let him dabble there. From time to time when it suited, Nebo would needle Zeke about it. It mostly always worked, like today, but Zeke never let it take him over. With Maisie life had been rocky before the last babe, and worse after he'd died. Nebo never niggled Zeke about the dead child, and he was never aware of what caused their marital troubles. He just knew there was a chink in Zeke's armour and that's all he needed.

Even as Zeke heard Nebo's horse galloping away, he stood, planted by the familiar rage, so white-hot he could see stars.

He knew Maisie and Nebo had never, ever gone there. He knew it in his heart, no matter what trouble there was between him and his wife. Nebo always pushed it, always tried to ignite an explosion in his younger brother, giving Zeke a pain in his gut. He bent to sweep up the cup and set it on the bench with a soft tap. Grabbing his hat, he stalked off to grab the dogs and tie them, then he'd go to the place where he had buried his infant son and not many months after buried his wife.

He knew he never would but some days he wondered if he could kill his brother.

Three

‘Elsa,’ her sister said, surprised as she opened the bakery’s front door. ‘This is very early. The store’s not even open. And my goodness, look at your hair. It’s all over the place. You know to plait it tight and not loose.’

Elsa had trudged into town, her heart heavy, her head empty. Even as hot and bothered as she was, she’d known not to go around the back door because Frank didn’t like that. She pushed inside, not bothering to fuss with her hair. ‘It’s not about Pa, in case you’re wondering,’ she said pointedly.

‘Then what?’ Rosie snapped, impatient. ‘I’m very busy getting ready to open.’

The aromas inside the bakery were irresistible. Elsa’s stomach growled, and she could feel her mouth water, the saliva pooling over her tongue. Hot baked bread was cooling on the vast benches. Buns with fruit dotted through them sat alongside, and rows of jam tarts, their edges neatly pinched and perfectly formed were behind them. She feared she would dribble as she told her sister the awful news. Just to be on the safe side, she wiped a hand over her mouth.

‘It’s George,’ she blurted. ‘He’s been killed in Victoria.’

‘Oh!’ Rosie’s hand clapped over her throat. ‘Oh no, not George. Not our George. How? Who—’

‘I came for some stores and the post yesterday and there was a letter to Pa. A kind gentleman from Western Districts in Victoria had sent it to inform us.’ When she’d had to come to town, Elsa hardly bothered any longer to visit her sister in the bakery. She’d usually been ignored so there was no point. She would do what she had to do, turn around and go home.

‘Victoria?’ Rosie looked bleak. ‘George travelled far on his adventure.’

Frank came lumbering into the storefront. ‘I heard a cry, what is it?’ Flour-dust handprints were on his apron, and a dollop of custard was stuck high up on it, as if he’d taken a bite of something and missed his mouth.

Rosie was groping for the bench to hold herself up. ‘It’s George. Elsa has just said he’s been killed.’ She leaned back heavily on the bench, with a hand on her throat. Her brow furrowed as she waved Elsa away.

Elsa blanched at that. She just needed someone to—

‘Lord love us, that’s awful,’ Frank cried, and pressed a fist to his chest. ‘Where? When?’

‘Casterton,’ Elsa said dully, resigned to standing in the store without an embrace from her sister.

‘Good Lord. That’s days from here.’ He was now by Rosie’s side and patting her shoulder. He didn’t seem to notice she edged away. ‘And Curtis?’ he asked. ‘He’s not taken a downturn, I hope.’

Elsa knew Frank was genuine for news of his father-in-law, however, later in the day, it would all be about the business of family and succession. She swallowed that down. ‘He is distraught, of course.’

‘Frank,’ Rosie said, dashing tears and pinching her nose. ‘We must close the store today.’ She groped inside her pinafore pocket to pull out a handkerchief.

All three looked at the produce on the benches. Elsa itched to grab bread, and buns, but dared not. Not yet.

‘Rosie, dearest,’ Frank began, his eyes wide in his florid face. ‘We need to remain calm. You must go to your father, and I will stay in the store for the morning. You know how busy it gets.’ Now his gaze darted around the store. ‘And after midday, I will close up and then we will decide on a course of action.’

That was sensible, Elsa decided. But how would she cope with Rosie in their house—or hut as Rosie called it—with her father? Still, it had to be that way.

Rosie tucked loose hair back under her cap. She dabbed at tears and daintily wiped her nose. She looked all blotchy, crying for her lost brother.

Elsa felt the lump in her throat again, yet still, tears would not come. It was as if grief was holding them back and not letting go.

‘Off you go then, dearest, go with your sister. But be back soon.’

Rosie looked up. ‘I’ll take the cart, Frank. I’m not walking miles there and then miles back.’ Not expecting resistance, that was clear, she pulled open the ties on her pinafore. ‘Wait out the front, Elsa. I won’t be a minute. Frank already had the horse hitched up for his delivery rounds earlier this morning.’

Frank was retreating to the kitchen, and Rosie was about to follow him out the back. ‘Might I pack some of this delicious produce to take home for Pa?’ Elsa asked guilelessly. Today she expected no resistance—Frank did turn and gave Rosie a small nod. They’d never been generous, and Elsa had found on some occasions that if she encountered Frank in the store and not Rosie, she’d had to hand over her pennies. Rosie had never taken money from her but never offered much either.

Her sister pointed at the bread, loaves that looked crusty and still had steam floating above them. ‘A loaf, and a fruit bun,’ Rosie said loudly. ‘You haven’t brought a basket so take mine. It has a

cloth in it. Both of which need to come back when I come back.’ Her sister stepped behind the curtain.

‘Yes, Rosie,’ Elsa said to thin air. Words were exchanged between husband and wife and then the back door opened and closed.

Rosie reappeared from behind the curtain, moving fast, her voice low. ‘Take four loaves and four big buns, and I’ll put in a couple of tarts. The meat pies we’ll pack under all of that and cover with the cloth. Hurry,’ she said, as they heard the horse and cart being driven around to the front.

Surprised, but as bid, Elsa packed the items into the basket and covered them quickly. Ushered outside by a flap of her sister’s hands, she waited until Frank had pulled up the cart. He stepped down and Rosie climbed up unaided. ‘Come along,’ she said to Elsa, while taking the reins.

Elsa put the basket into the cart and climbed up to sit by her sister. A quick wave of hands between Rosie and her husband, and then Rosie snapped the reins. The horse and cart pulled away.

As they drove, Elsa knew she’d be interrogated over the news, but it didn’t happen right away. Except for an occasional snivel, and a hiccup—Rosie was letting out her grief—there was no other sound from her sister. Glancing sideways, Elsa could see Rosie really was struggling, yet when she ventured a reassuring hand on Rosie’s arm, her sister had shaken it off, irascibly.

On the way out of town, Elsa studied the horse, Peppin, pulling the cart. He wasn’t always harnessed. She knew Frank sometimes saddled him up and rode the poor thing around if there’d only been a few deliveries. And these days with a reduced population in the town, that seemed to be the case. She wondered why he’d been harnessed today. Perhaps Frank was feeling the weather again and hadn’t wanted to ride, or walk. He was always so florid in the face lately.

A fresh breeze whipped up her hair. She found a length of worn calico ribbon in her pinafore and tied it back. As the light gusts brought the scent of the sea, in the morning light, she could see white-tipped waves in the distance. She breathed deeply, closing her eyes for just a moment to capture that hint of salt and seaweed. The strong bouquet of the coastal daisy, its new shoots piney and sweet was a reminder of a familiar part of home. All the scents of home never failed to make her feel as if there was some reason for her existence, but she couldn't ever capture what that reason might be. It just felt like hope, a fresh start every time she smelled it, and like—

'Now with George gone,' Rosie said, all matter-of-fact. The cart had gone past the last of the buildings and pedestrians in the town and was headed out along Main Road. Lake Charra came into view, and the women crinkled their noses as its sulphuric odour drifted by. They passed the handsome Lakeside House at a steady pace. 'And Pa too ill and not likely to recover, you will have to think about where you'll live.'

Elsa was taken aback. 'Will I just?' she said, trying to keep down a sudden burst of anger. 'Pa is not yet dead, if you don't mind, and I will stay there until he has departed. As for George, can we not give him at least a little of our thoughts before you bundle me up and get rid of me?'

Rosie scoffed and a breath puffed out. 'Not what I meant.' Her nose was swollen and red, but the tears had stopped. 'Do you know when George died? Did this letter writer tell us?' She seemed very insistent, even angry perhaps.

Not the reaction Elsa expected from Rosie on this occasion. Perplexed, she said, 'It seems about two or three weeks ago, by the date on the letter.'

'Took a long time to arrive, then, didn't it?' Rosie was snappy. 'Could've walked faster.'

Elsa shrugged. 'Anything could have happened to delay the mail.'

'Well, *come along then*. Did the man say how he died?'

'Bushrangers killed him.'

'Bushrangers?' Rosie erupted. 'There's no such thing anymore.' She looked at Elsa before sharply turning back to concentrate on the road. 'Where?'

'I told you. Casterton. It's in the Western Districts.'

'Elsa, that is a huge area. Where exactly? What else do you know? Was he robbed?'

'I—would presume as much, and that is such a horrible thought. I have no other details but what was in the letter. You'll see it when we get home.' Elsa felt a round of painful thuds strike from within as her pulse raced. Her poor brother. He would have had nothing to hand over to bushrangers—*is that why he got himself killed?* 'There are so many questions, Rosie, we may never have the answers.'

A mile along, Lake Fellmongery, named for the now declining business of removing wool from sheepskin, appeared on their right. Fresh air—not long to go now before their turn-off. Rosie flicked the reins. 'Come on, Peppin,' she yelled ahead. 'Get a move on.'

Peppin trotted his way to the hitching rail out the front of their father's house and waited patiently to be tied. Elsa alighted, put down the basket and patted his muzzle, whispering her thanks. She knotted the reins loosely over the rail.

Rosie braked the cart and jumped to the ground. She glanced down the yard beyond to the clearing where the unfinished house stood. Its first row of packed stones was covered in long strands of dead weeds that seemed to have no end, and sturdy thistles reached high on its walls, bereft of a roof. 'Waste of money and

effort,' she muttered. 'Bring the basket, Elsa,' she ordered, pushing open the door to the hut.

With the basket already in hand, Elsa decided she'd resisted the baked goods long enough. Hanging back just a little, she snuck a hand under the cloth, pinched off a small piece of fruit bun and popped it into her mouth, chewing delightedly, swallowing hurriedly before she reached the door to the hut.

But a lump of chewed bun stuck in her throat when she heard her sister wail.

Four

Even though Curtis Goody was not the heavy, densely muscled man he had been before being stricken, the sisters had a hard time trying to take their father's body from his bed to place him into the back of the cart.

Rosie had wailed afresh, and who could blame her? If only Elsa could wail out her grief too, but nothing came. The blow of George's death had numbed her, but this—her father now dead—so soon after. She couldn't take it in. Couldn't work her mind around it.

She'd slumped by the bed watching Rosie, who'd been frantic, trying to wake their father. Of course nothing had worked. Of course not. Death was final, a hollow silence, an eerie space, which before had been filled with noisy life. Elsa had only been away from home perhaps three hours and in that time, life had left him, quick as that. Gone.

Had he minded dying on his own? Or had he waited until Elsa left so he could slip away by himself, resting his weary heart without disappointing those clinging to him, and keeping him in this life? That was it—that was probably it. It was his time, and he'd just decided to go. *But oh, that silence, that space.*

The last weeks of his life had left him feebly coloured and now that life was gone, he was even a paler shade than before, tight-skinned and waxy. He was still warm to the touch—perhaps Rosie was right: he would soon wake. *He looks like he needs a shave.* Elsa would do that for him. *Perhaps Elsa is going mad, thinks Elsa.* Her mind was whirling in strange loops.

Now, with their father's body covered in the cart and under the shade of a gum tree, they'd returned to the hut. In her own grief, she hadn't taken any notice of her sister who seemed to be babbling. '... few minutes, only a few minutes, a few minutes more ...' and the repetition was beginning to sink in. Then Rosie was rushing from corner to corner of the hut, muttering, 'Where would he put it?' She pulled Elsa's cot from the wall, upended the milking stool. Fiddled about in the disused butter churn. Swiped along the top of the rough homemade bricks of the mantel. Tipped up her father's cot and peered under, sweeping a hand over the floorboards underneath. She flipped through the raggedy story books and old copies of *The Bulletin* from which Elsa had always read to her father (before he got bored with the same old stuff. They'd been too poor lately to buy more).

Rosie stood up and paced, scanning the rough walls and the scrappy ceiling. Elsa clutched her arm, stopped her for a moment. 'Where would he put what? What are you looking for?' She gazed around at the mess: there was an awful lot of straightening up she would have to do— Oh, what did that matter, now?

Rosie flung herself onto a small bench seat, one of a pair her father had fashioned so the family could perch and eat from a trestle table. Her hair was mussed, her cheeks had bright pink spots where colour bloomed and her nose was pinched.

'Rosie?' Elsa was still waiting.

'Pa had buried a tin of money. It was full of sovereigns.'

Elsa stared, open-mouthed. 'Full of sovereigns?'

‘At least thirty of them, he said.’ Rosie glanced at Elsa, it seemed without seeing her.

‘That’s a fortune,’ Elsa breathed.

‘Yes, it is,’ Rosie cried. ‘He was supposed to tell me where it was hidden when George took off on his adventure. George had to have known where it was, because he would have inherited after Pa’s death. But now both of them have gone—’ Rosie burst into fresh tears.

Shocked by the news, Elsa shot to her feet. ‘Where did he get such money?’ Her father might have told her about it. Should have told her. It would certainly have helped them.

‘He said he’d found it when he first bought the property. Whosever it was, they’d been long since gone by that time.’

‘That’s astounding. No one missed thirty sovereigns?’

Bleary-eyed and waspish, Rosie said, ‘Clearly not, Elsa.’

‘I—have no knowledge of such a tin.’

‘Of course you wouldn’t,’ Rosie snapped. ‘Besides, what would you have done with it if you did know?’ She stood up again, rubbing her chafed hands together.

Elsa spun around, anger flaring. ‘But what would you do with it, sister? Give it to that lump of a husband of yours?’

Rosie turned on her. ‘No. I was going leave him with his bakery. Let him do the work for a change.’

Elsa’s mouth dropped open again. ‘Leave Frank?’

‘I was going to get the tin and run from here. Go far away and start my life again, venture out of this dying place to find somewhere exciting. Somewhere I could breathe again and live my life.’ Flattening her hands on the table, she leaned on it and seemed out of breath.

‘And so—leave me?’ Elsa was incredulous. ‘Leave me penniless?’

‘Oh *no*,’ Rosie cried, gaping in horror. ‘Do you suppose George took it with him and it’s now in the hands of the bushrangers?’

Obviously, Rosie's issue had nothing to do with Elsa's indignation. But this was her big sister talking. This was a woman she'd always looked up to—not necessarily had liked all the time but had certainly looked up to. 'I don't know,' Elsa replied, her mind boggled. 'He could have. But if he had it, George was the sort to have spent it, not kept it or kept it hidden.'

Rosie held her head and grimaced. 'That's true, the silly boy.' They all thought of George as a boy, no matter that he was older than Elsa by two years. 'Perhaps that's why he was murdered. He might have flashed the coin around—that would undoubtedly attract attention.' She exhaled. 'We should look for the tin. If we can't find it quickly, we will leave. Or I'll leave. You don't have to come. I don't need you.' Her tone was sharp.

At forty, Rosie was part of a world Elsa had not yet begun to explore. The baby of the family, Elsa had been protected by three older brothers and the firstborn Rosie, and never dreamed she would be left behind—by all of them as it was turning out.

'What—you'd really do that? Abandon me? Had you found the tin of coins earlier, where would you have put me, or sent me?' Elsa heard her voice become shrill. 'And now, with our father dead, where am I to go? You still have Frank if you stay—'

'Oh, I don't know what I mean,' Rosie shrilled. 'Damn and blast Frank.' She waved her arm around the room: 'Are there any other hiding places here?'

Elsa spread her hands, confounded by all of this. It was all wrong. George was dead, her father was dead—his body going cold in the cart—her sister had gone mad and now there was nowhere left for her to go. She would be told to move on if Frank really did take over administration of the property—which of course he was legally able to do.

If those coins are here, they might be my salvation.

Springing out of her stupor, Elsa checked under her bed for any loose boards. Squeezing her arm behind the old cooker she felt for anything wedged in behind it. She dragged out the pine box that had been their pantry cupboard and looked behind that. *Nothing*. Where would a man hide a tin of gold coins?

Good Lord. Their father was dead. There was something more pressing to do. ‘Rosie, wait.’ She held up her hand. ‘Wait,’ she said more calmly. ‘We have to plan, yes, but first we have to get Pa to a coffin maker, get him buried properly without folk accusing us of a terrible thing.’ Elsa knew the ramifications of all this was still a jumble.

‘What terrible thing?’ Rosie asked, looking frightened.

‘Rosie, what if people say we had done something to Pa for this tin of coins? Does anyone know? Does Frank know?’

‘I don’t know, I don’t know.’ Rosie clamped her hands together. ‘No, Frank doesn’t know, I’m sure of it and don’t be ridiculous. We wouldn’t kill our own father for it.’ And then understanding dawned. ‘Oh, my God.’

‘You see, don’t you? We must be very quiet about this tin. We must ask Frank for the money to bury our poor Pa—’

Rosie wailed yet again.

‘—and then plan ...’ Elsa rubbed her face hard with both hands and swiped them into her hair, dislodging more from its loose plait. Impatient, she swiped at the thick, unruly locks. ‘We must find that tin and hide it anew. If Frank does know of it, we must claim ignorance. He must not find it.’ Elsa’s mind was working fast. She knew their land was so small that it wouldn’t bring much if they were to put it up for sale. And Frank would still have the right to administer their affairs if their father had named him. ‘We could just sell up.’ Her heart sunk at the thought.

Rosie shook her head. 'The whole district would go for a song these days, why would this patch of worthless scrub be any different? You know the Robe port is all but dead. People are abandoning their farms, their homes and their businesses.'

'Frank wouldn't abandon your business.'

'He might if he knew about the gold coins.' Rosie seemed annoyed when Elsa shook her head in disbelief. She went on, 'If he closed the bakery, he would expect me to go with him wherever he went.' She held her head as if it pained her. 'But I don't want to be married to him any longer. I don't want to be his wife.' It was another wail, one probably borne out of years of thought.

'How can you not want it? There's no solution to that, is there?'

'I could divorce. All the more reason for me to find the tin.'

'Oh, Rosie. What grounds for divorce do you have? He has to be proven guilty of cruelty, or desertion or adultery. And we know he has provided for you—even if you're the one doing all the work. No magistrate would release you.'

Elsa had read enough newspapers; she knew of the terrible scandals divorce created. All the same, she couldn't see that there was much going for marriage. Just look at her sister: so unhappy that she would plan such a desperate move as to run away from everything she knew and risk her life by being alone in the world. A fallen woman is how she would be labelled. Hers would not be a happy or a safe life and yet Rosie was prepared to forego all of it. What sort of turmoil drove that? Divorce was terribly frowned upon, and a woman who instigated it would be almost untouchable afterwards. She despaired for Rosie.

It irked Elsa though, that Rosie would choose to abandon her, too. She would have to look after herself. If her only sister could forsake her for a tin of coins, who on earth could Elsa trust now but herself?

Five

In the bakery, Elsa watched with growing concern as she realised Rosie was losing the battle with Frank. Even though he had offered what appeared to be sincere condolences to them, he hadn't softened one iota. Not that Elsa had expected it, but she'd been sure Frank had respected their father. Perhaps not.

It was time for her to step in. 'I apologise for interrupting, Mr Putney—Frank,' she started. Frank hated being interrupted, especially when they were standing inside the store. (Mind you, he didn't mind interrupting others when he felt like it.) He also hated being called by his first name in public. Someone might come in and hear, and it could be misconstrued that he was letting his sister-in-law be impertinent. That was the least of her worries; right now her father's casket was being measured up at the blacksmith's—who was also the coffin maker. 'But might I not work for you too, in order to repay you for the purchase of our pa's coffin? We certainly don't want him going to his grave with only his clothes on.'

Rosie had frowned at her sister, but Frank hadn't seen that. He turned to look at her. 'It would need quite a lot of work to repay that sort of money.'

A few pounds was all, not a lifetime's worth of work, Elsa was sure. She forced a wheedle into her voice. 'And you well know I'm a hard worker. Why else would we still be able to live on the farm?' As she spread her hands, she realised just how dirty they were, the creases stained with the colour of the earth and her nails scuffed and dark.

Frank chortled. 'The farm. Good-for-nothing piece of dirt right now. Still, might be worth something in the future. We'll bury him there. That way I won't have to pay for a hole to be dug in the town cemetery.'

Elsa swallowed down the affront and didn't dare look at her sister. 'Yes. We can do that, he'll rest beside Ma, that's preferable,' she said agreeably, her eyes smarting. 'I can dig a hole if necessary.'

Frank went back to his till but didn't open it, just stood there, lord of the manor. 'In that case, as soon as the smithy has finished the coffin, you'd better start digging. There's no time to waste—it's already early afternoon and this warm weather will finish off a body quick enough.' He checked over his shoulder and addressed Rosie. 'You may take today for your sister and the sad duty. If the reverend can perform a ceremony, we'll have it the day after tomorrow. That's enough time.' He turned away; they'd been dismissed.

For the first time in a long time, Elsa saw the Rosie she thought she'd known for years. Her sister's face reddened, and her mouth flattened to a thin line, but she said quite calmly, 'Thank you, Frank.' However, when Rosie glanced her way, Elsa noticed the lightning flash in her eyes. She then tilted her head, indicating they should leave.

Rosie swept ahead of Elsa and left by the back door, snatching off her pinafore and grabbing her hat. They'd only been back in the town with their father's body an hour, yet Elsa knew Rosie had been expected to don her work apron as if nothing was amiss.

Upon their return, Rosie had disappeared into the house attached at the back of the bakery. Elsa was left standing on her own quite embarrassed as customers filed in to be served by Frank. For whatever reason, Rosie had taken her time, then returned wearing a clean pinafore over her day dress.

Now, trailing her sister, who marched to the smithy's, Elsa felt quite outside herself. Having to ask for a coffin to be built was one thing; being unsure that funds would be made available to pay for it was another. Unsettling and wrong. Frank had the money to do it. A person had a right to be buried with decency. It was their father, after all.

'Miz Putney,' the smithy yelled at Rosie when they entered the forge area. He always yelled, whether he was in his forge or not. He yelled over the roar of his fire, and the clanging of his tools on the huge anvil, even, it seemed, over thin air. Perhaps it was easier for him to do so all the time. He tipped his cap. 'Miss Goody,' he blasted at Elsa. 'Got yer pa's box all ready. Had one half done, just had to saw off a bit on account of he's short.' He pointed to a coffin standing on its end on the far wall. Then he wiped his forehead with his forearm, smearing more soot and sawdust over himself. With singes on his eyebrows and one sideburn almost completely gone, he must have got too close to his fire at some point.

Rosie crossed the shed to check the coffin.

'Thank you, Mr Benson,' Elsa said. She didn't have to yell. 'We'll need help to get Pa into it and then into the back of the cart.'

He nodded, made a sad face, then whistled through his teeth. Young Henry, his son appeared, just as blackened from soot as his father. His teeth gleamed against his dirty face. 'Hello, Miss Goody.'

Henry was only about twenty and had a confidence that was a bit disconcerting. Still, she wouldn't take any notice of someone

so cheeky and full of himself, even if he did have that heady I'm-interested-in-you stare that on other occasions had made her insides tingle. If he'd been older, Elsa *might* have taken a shine to him. So forthright was his stare today that she couldn't help the patter inside her chest—on the day of her father's death, if you please. She turned away, dismayed with herself.

'Lad,' Mr Benson yelled. 'We have to help the ladies load up their pa.'

'Right you are.' Henry sidled past Elsa, his eyes now kind with sympathy (so he'd just redeemed himself), and when he got to Rosie, scuttled around her to hoist the coffin over his shoulder.

Elsa followed as he took it out to their cart. Their horse, Peppin still harnessed, was fully under shade, and so poor Pa would have been relatively cool. When Henry and Mr Benson got in the back of the cart, and the coffin followed, poor Pa was unceremoniously hefted inside it.

As the lid was slid over the top, Rosie started to say something but stopped. There was no reason to stop them closing the coffin. Mr Benson pulled out a hammer from the bag slung about his thick waist. With three or four nails clamped between his teeth, and more in his hands, he whacked them into the lid, securing it. Elsa ears had begun to ring.

'Guessin' you done spoke to the doc and got yer pa a death certificate,' he shouted while concentrating. He flicked a quick look at Rosie who nodded curtly.

Elsa let the lie slip by. She hadn't thought of that, but nobody would dispute their father had been dying, and was now dead. They would register it soon. *But first, please God, let's bury my poor pa.*

Finally, Mr Benson was done. 'That oughta keep him tight,' he yelled and jumped down from the cart. He snatched off his hat and Henry followed suit. 'Right sorry, Miz Putney, Miss Goody.'

They nodded at both of them. 'I'll send me bill to Mr Putney, directly,' Mr Benson said.

Rosie stopped him then. 'No need. Here. Five pounds, isn't it?' She clutched the notes and held them up for him to see.

Elsa gaped.

Mr Benson shook his head. 'Two pounds too much, Miz Putney.'

'If we can have Henry for this afternoon at our farm to dig a hole, would that make it about right?'

'Miz Putney, it's still—'

'For God's sake, man. We're trying to bury our father,' Rosie said, glaring. She thrust the notes at him. Elsa closed her mouth.

Mr Benson pocketed the money. 'Whenever you're ready, Miz Putney.'

'We're ready now.'

At Mr Benson's lift of his chin, Henry leapt into the driver's seat. Rosie and Elsa climbed up beside him.

'Thank you, Mr Benson,' Elsa said as Henry released the brake and the cart lurched forward.



As she helped Henry dig a decent enough hole for her father, right alongside her mother's grave, there was no time for Elsa to speak to Rosie on her own. Digging had been easier than she'd imagined. The earth around had already been loosened—of course at the time of her mother's interment a while ago. Also because George had always intended to plant shrubs there, and had begun to work the soil, never imagining that their father would lay there so soon. *Dear funny, sentimental George*. Elsa wondered if she and Rosie should try and bring George back home for burial here. But she decided against putting it to Rosie. It would be a terrible task,

grief aside. They'd have to dig up George from wherever he was. Elsa wasn't so sure she could do it.

Henry did most of the harder work as they steadily dug into the solid earth. The only talk was when someone needed a drink. Sweat dried on Elsa's face and neck. She had dirt all over her—face, neck, dress, boots. Didn't matter, the job had to be finished, and Elsa was used to being dirty; it was part of working the land, and it was honest work. She'd get to bathe when she could.

Once a decent depth was reached, Henry slaked his thirst by slurping from the ladle inside the water barrel nearby. Then he dunked his head in the horse's water trough. He slung his hat in it too and wrung it out. 'I'll be off then,' he said, as he placed it back on his head.

'No, Henry.' Rosie stopped him. 'You need to help us get the coffin down into the hole, and then fill it in. A shilling, just for you,' she said. 'Come along. We need to get it done quickly.'

It was a juggle getting the coffin off the back of the wagon. Once they'd manhandled it to the ground, they only had to carry it a short distance to the hole. Then Henry jumped into the pit and directed Elsa and Rosie to push it towards him so that one end of the coffin could hang over the edge.

Elsa stepped back. *Gracious me.* They'd hardly have managed as well without Henry.

He worked the casket down until the narrow end rested on the cool ground. He ducked underneath it and crept it all the way until he was ready to fully lay it down.

'Best not to look at this bit, ladies,' he called up, his hands holding the broad part of the small coffin.

Rosie turned away and grabbed Elsa's arm, forcing her to do the same. Elsa, bewildered, heard a loud thump and a curse then Henry saying, 'He's in.'

Both Elsa and Rosie turned back for a moment to see him step on the coffin to climb out of the hole. They stood side by side now. Rosie took a deep breath as she gazed down on it; Elsa could see tears again trailing on her sister's cheeks.

'I'm so sorry, Pa,' Rosie whispered. She swiped her face, smearing dust over the sheen of perspiration. Rosie looked as dirty as Elsa felt.

Henry took up a shovel to lean on. He'd already knocked off his hat, ready for paying his respects.

Elsa and Rosie gripped hands. It was strange. *The whole thing is strange. I feel very strange.* The lump in her throat was growing again. Here they were, filthy, their father just dead these last few hours and George three weeks gone ...

Now he is in his grave and there is a blacksmith's son standing by with a shovel and the day has suddenly become very hot and I really feel quite peculiar as I'm saying a few mumbled words with my sister for our father and now clods of earth are being shoveled back into the hole and—

She took a breath. It was done. Their father was beside their mother. Henry was whacking the back of the shovel on the low mound of earth covering the hole. Then, he dunked his hat in the water trough again, and helped himself to another drink. 'If there's nothin' else you want doin', Miz Putney?' With a shake of Rosie's head, he pocketed the shilling offered, slapped on his hat, and looked at Elsa. 'I'm better'n that mad Pete Southie that's comin' after you. Remember that, Elsa Goody.' He waved and began walking back to the town.

Rosie regarded her sister. 'You will tell me about that later.'

Elsa looked away. 'Nothing to tell.'

She stood by the graves. Her mother's had a cross on it, which was leaning a little in loose soil. The roughly carved letters read: KITTY GOODY. DIED 1889. LOVED WIFE AND MOTHER. George had made it, and had, just weeks before he'd left, painted the

letters he'd previously meticulously carved. Elsa reached down and straightened the cross. Who would they get to make one for their father? Her throat squeezed.

'We must get a stone marker for them,' she rasped. 'One so that the words don't disappear.' At her sister's silence, she looked across.

Rosie was on her knees, doubled over and weeping silently. This time when Elsa put her hand on Rosie's shoulder, she wasn't brushed away. Still her own tears wouldn't come. There should have been tears for the loss of her father, and for her mother and her three brothers. Elsa would have to let Rosie cry tears for her as well.

Elsa had directed her sister out of the afternoon sun and into the hut. A bowl of now dirty water and a freshly filled pitcher stood on the narrow table inside. They had each divested their dresses and washed. They'd sat, still in their boots and their chemises with pinafores tied over, and sponged off the dirtiest bits on the dresses. Once they'd been brushed down, the garments were left to dry over the hitching rail outside. No one would see them. No one was expected. No one would come. News of their father's death would eventually reach the few folk still left in town, and maybe tomorrow people might visit to offer condolences.

Elsa had given the last of the bought feed to Peppin. Then she'd rubbed him down and he seemed content enough. Now back inside, she used the washcloth again and felt refreshed. She re-tied her apron, feeling better having it over her chemise.

Rosie had done the same and was patting her face dry. 'I've wanted to talk to you about something all day, something I've thought carefully about.' She discarded the towel, placing her palms flat on the table. 'It came to me this morning when I left you in the shop,' she said as she twisted her wedding ring off and put it back on again.

‘What is it?’ Elsa had let out her hair and was trying to drag her mother’s brush through it, the only thing of Kitty’s she now had. Setting the brush aside, Elsa piled her hair up into a twist and pinned it as best she could. ‘Tell me,’ she prompted.

‘You are a grown woman, now, well and truly, as I am,’ Rosie said and hesitated.

Elsa frowned. *This does not bode well.*

‘And we know that there is a tin of money somewhere,’ Rosie began again.

‘We know there *was* a tin of money,’ Elsa replied.

Rosie let that go. ‘And as there are now no brothers of ours anymore ...’

Elsa was listening. Her sister had a plan but, right now, she couldn’t presume what it might be. ‘Yes?’

‘We need to look after ourselves.’ Rosie was looking at her and for the first time Elsa felt as if it was as an equal, not a merely tolerated baby sister.

Elsa’s eyes were scratchy and dry. Her throat hurt from the lump in it that still hadn’t subsided, and she had begun to feel overwhelmingly tired. She sighed. ‘Of course we do, but you are ready to leave Frank, and to leave me here to fend for myself, so I can’t see how *we* could do that.’ She was tapping her fingers on the table. ‘However, if I stay here, and you still have money in your pocket, I’d like to have a cow again and that way I can—’

‘We should both leave here, now,’ Rosie said, and closed a fist against her chest. ‘Or at least first thing in the morning. We have the cart, and Peppin. Frank is not expecting me back tonight.’ She patted her side. ‘And I do have some money in a purse here.’

Elsa thought for a moment, her mouth set. ‘Is that why we had to bury Pa so quick?’

‘No. That was plain necessity.’

‘It was too quick.’

‘Have it your own way, but the weather was against us. It is done.’ Rosie sighed. ‘If you don’t want to come with me, I’m still going, and I will take Peppin and the cart.’ She stood up. ‘Yes, no point waiting, is there? I’ll go now so that you can sit here on your righteous backside and be the spoiled brat of the family you always were. Good luck finding something to eat while you’re at it.’ They both glanced at the basket of bread and buns and pies left abandoned this morning. ‘We should truly eat those pies soon,’ she said a bit more softly, ‘but after that, *good luck* finding food.’

Elsa could not believe what she’d just heard. ‘I was not spoiled. I worked as hard as my brothers when they were here—’ *Oh, that sounded so odd.* ‘But I have my own mind, and I will always speak it.’

‘And get away with it.’

‘Not so. On his dying bed—’ *That was only this morning.* ‘Pa said that he wouldn’t consider that I administer—’

‘All those grand ideas about the rights of us women.’ Rosie shook her head.

‘Yes,’ Elsa declared. ‘The laws allow it now. And you well know there’s to be an election in April and I intend to be the first woman to cast a vote.’

Rosie scoffed. ‘Where? In Adelaide?’

‘No, here,’ Elsa cried. ‘There is to be a polling booth here, in Robe. We are in the Albert electorate.’

‘And so next, you’ll be our new governor, I expect.’

Elsa scowled. ‘I will be exercising my right to vote,’ she said between her teeth.

‘And that’s a nice word-for-word quote you’ve read at some point,’ Rosie said, a dismissive wave of her hand following. ‘If I’d known that by saving all those newspapers for you, we’d have a raging suffragette—’

‘Suffragist,’ Elsa corrected. ‘And for your information,’ she erupted. ‘The governor is appointed by the queen, not by the general public.’

‘You’ll stand for parliament, then,’ Rosie goaded.

‘No women have decided to stand. If *you’d* read all the papers you saved for me, you’d know that.’

‘God, listen to you—no wonder people laugh.’

Elsa bristled. She certainly didn’t mind being vocal about her views. Perhaps other women were smarter than she was—keeping their views to themselves. But what good would that do? ‘I don’t care if they do laugh. I’ll stand up for what I believe in, otherwise how will things ever change?’

‘Yes, yes. And as impoverished as you are, no doubt it will serve you well. All this reading, and standing up for what you believe in, and changing everything by having one single vote.’ Rosie dusted herself down. ‘Well, I can’t waste time squawking about that. I’ve made up my mind and I’m not turning back. I’ll take a few things from here and be on my way, so that I can stand up for what *I* believe in.’

‘Oh? And that’s to leave your husband and be destitute, is it?’

‘Don’t be churlish. You know nothing of marriage.’

‘And I don’t want to know.’

‘Spoken like a true brat—you don’t want to know. In that case, make no comment.’ Rosie looked around. She picked up her father’s bedclothes and sniffed, then tossed them back.

Elsa thrust off her seat. ‘Then tell me what it’s been like so I can understand why you want to leave.’

Rosie set her mouth and ignored her. She went to Elsa’s cot and picked up the sheet there, decided it was good enough to take with her and began to strip the bed. Elsa snatched the bedclothes out of her hands. Rosie countered, ‘I’ll be sleeping in the cart,

Elsa, so I need to take some bedding. At least you'll have time to wash Pa's bedclothes tomorrow before you need them here.'

'*Rosie.*' Elsa dropped her bedsheets back on the cot.

Rosie stamped her foot and shouted, 'Well, you're just standing there like some nincompoop, not doing anything. It's time to go.'

Elsa's thoughts were spinning again. 'I—haven't had time to check things over here.'

'Check what things—all the gold and silver?'

Elsa glanced around the hut that now looked so foreign. 'I—wanted to look for Ma's locket, and I need to consider what to take, if I'm to leave. How can we leave with nothing? We'll both be impoverished—'

'My mind is made up. Hurry up and pack some clothes. And I can tell you, you won't find Ma's locket. George took it with him. Good old sentimental George.' Rosie cast about, looking for something. A small trunk caught her eye and she went to it, opened it and pulled out its ragged horse rugs until she found an old canvas satchel. 'This will do for your smalls.'

Elsa stared at Rosie. 'George took it? Oh no.' Then she felt real tears beginning to smart. 'Ma's locket was the only thing with a picture of her.'

Rosie flipped the satchel to the floor. 'I know,' she said with empathy. 'And now there's nothing of Pa left either.'

'Yes, but he was going to live forever.' Tears filled Elsa's eyes, but she dashed them away before they fell, and blinked and blinked to make sure they'd disappear. She set her jaw. 'I hadn't given a thought to how I'd fare here in the hut with no one, and no money. And now, suddenly, that doesn't even matter.' Hearing her own words, she looked with surprise at Rosie. Then she wiped her nose and went to the little milking stool that had been upended in Rosie's first manic rush around the hut. Underneath it was Mr Jones's letter. She picked it up and smoothed it against

her chemise then held it to the light. 'If George is buried on this man's property, we must go there.'

Rosie threw her hands in the air. 'Into Victoria? There are wild men there, and bushrangers again, the letter said.'

'It was just a description, I'm sure,' Elsa said. 'There haven't been real bushrangers anywhere since—'

'Anything George had with him in Victoria would've been stolen by whoever killed him. Call them bushrangers or not, I don't care, I won't go there,' her sister cried.

Exasperated, Elsa threw her hands in the air. 'So where did you think you'd go, Rosie?' The expression on her sister's face answered that. She'd not thought that far. Taking a breath, Elsa changed her tone. 'I hear the Western Districts is quite a beautiful area. Besides, this man, this—' she consulted the letter, 'Ezekiel Jones was kind enough to bury our brother.' Her heart gave a little thud as she mentioned the man's name. *How odd.* She folded it, put it back in its envelope and tucked it into her bodice. 'Perhaps he would be kind enough to offer us more information. George might have told him things.'

Rosie shook her head, frowning. Elsa knew she was thinking. 'We could write a letter instead,' she said, not quite ready to give over to Elsa's idea.

'And how would we receive an answer if we run away?'

Rosie paced the room, flicking items up from where they'd been cast, checking in case she'd missed something. When she spun back to Elsa, she grabbed up the satchel. 'All right, we go to Victoria. But pack this with what you need, and let's go now, so we don't get caught by some unexpected sympathiser for our dear Pa's death.' She tossed the bag onto their father's bed then flung open the hut's flimsy door, and marched smack bang into a leering Pete Southie. She propelled backwards in shock as he hovered in the doorway.

Elsa sucked in a breath, her chest tight.

‘Ladies,’ he said and whipped off his hat as he stepped inside. He was a broad-shouldered, stocky man with bushy eyebrows, and black and grey whiskers shaved haphazardly. The sour tang of fresh sweat, the earthy odour of rangy horse and the stench of stale tobacco smoke pervaded the hut. ‘Where are ye going if you’re packin’?’ He glanced at Elsa.

Elsa wasn’t fooled by that smile. It wasn’t kindly, it was a leer, for sure. His gaze roved over her, then flicked to Rosie. She pulled her pinafore strings tighter. They were both only wearing pinafores over their chemises. *Think quick, girl.* She glanced around at the disarray, at the fireplace, at the old kettle waiting to be packed, at her father’s bed with the linens crumpled on it. At the little bottle of sleeping draught left by the doctor. ‘We’re closing up the house to decide what’s to be done, and we’re going back to the bakery, aren’t we, Rosie?’ she said as Rosie came to lean against her. She gripped her sister’s shaking hand.

‘A good thing I arrived then, to see ye’re all right. I can escort ye back.’

‘We’re all right,’ Elsa said, squeezing Rosie’s fingers before she let go. ‘I suppose you’ll be wanting tea after the ride out.’

Southie’s eyes lit up. ‘I would. Ye’re being generous today, Miss Elsa.’

Elsa glanced at Rosie who was frowning, her gaze still on Pete Southie. ‘Him just buried, our pa would have wanted us to offer hospitality.’ She noted her sister was saying nothing. Rosie’s mouth was firmly closed.

‘He was a good man, Curtis Goody was,’ he said and helped himself to a chair, swinging it in front of the door. He sat, elbows on his knees, staring intently at them.

Blocking escape.

Feeling Rosie stiffen, Elsa said, 'I think there are still hot coals in the cooker, so tea shouldn't take long.' She pushed at her sister. 'The tea, if you please, and there's a third cup somewhere.' *Think.* As Rosie crossed to the mantel, Elsa turned to her father's bed linens. *Aha.* 'We have to take all this to town to wash because the well here is nearly dry again, isn't it, Rosie?' As she gathered the old sheets, she swept the little bottle from the bedside table into her pinny pocket. Turning, her arms full, she faced Southie.

He shot to his feet. 'I'll put them in the cart for ye, duly,' he said and reached over to grab them from her arms.

Elsa flinched as his hard fingers, gathering the bundle, scraped both her breasts. She gritted her teeth and kept her features stony as he sat back down again. He scrunched the bundle flat, shoved it under his feet, and folded his arms, watching one woman then the other. A sting of pinpricks rushed across the backs of Elsa's hands. *Fear?* No, not that. *Danger.*

Rosie poked an iron rod into the cooker, stirring the coals. Elsa wondered about the poker, but watching Rosie, she knew her sister wouldn't take any action with it. *She's too jittery.* She watched her sister drop the tamp with a clang and thump the kettle onto the hotplate. Water splashed and spat. Rosie shoved three pannikins across the stovetop and threw a hard glance at Elsa.

Elsa ignored it, steadied the cups and asked him, 'Sugar?' She drew the tin from above the cooker and hovered it over a rusty pannikin.

'You know I do, Miss Elsa. Four spoons.'

She waited imperiously. Dared him with a glare.

'If ye please,' he added, and shuffled in the seat.

Four spoons, indeed. Such extravagance, you great gormless hog. Go wallow in a swamp somewhere. Elsa took a spoon from the hutch drawer and cranked open the sugar tin. She fiddled, and with

her back turned, palmed the little bottle in her pocket, flicked the tiny cork from its neck and dropped tincture generously into the cup. Belatedly, she wondered if it was too much. *Too late.* A scent of cinnamon and cloves wafted up. She capped the bottle and dropped it back in her pocket. Rosie saw, and chewed down on her lip.

Elsa spooned sugar into a cup. *Why does boiling water take so long?* She jiggled the kitchen utensils. She reached for the ancient teapot on the mantel, lumped a handful of tea leaves into it from the little box on the same shelf, and set it on the stovetop. Rosie snatched up the switch broom and swept madly along the hearth.

‘Sad day,’ Southie said, no doubt warming to this picture of domesticity. ‘You ladies thinkin’ straight, though, getting’ ready to go Frank’s bakery an’ bein’ under his wing an’ all.’

Rosie bristled.

Elsa, rolling her eyes, turned her attention to the tardy kettle. Then—at last—the damn thing was boiling. She snatched it up, poured hot water into the teapot and immediately filled their cups, careful to keep her eye on which one was meant for Southie.

‘Ye’ve not steeped the tea,’ he said, pointing an accusing finger.

Terse, Elsa kept pouring, ‘We like it like that.’

‘In my house—’

‘We’re not in your house,’ she snapped, and glared again. Making a big thing of stirring his sugar, she finally handed it to him. ‘You know we don’t have milk.’

‘Perhaps I can fix that for ye, one day, Miss Elsa.’

Miss Elsa wanted to fix him with a clunk on the head. One of Pa’s iron boot lasts, which sat by the edge of the hearth, would do nicely but it was too hard to get to.

‘When you consent to—’

‘Our father has just died, Mr Southie,’ Rosie announced, flinging the broom to the floor. ‘And we’ve just learned of George’s

death, too. There'll be no talk today of consenting to anything,' she hissed.

Southie blew into his tea, slurped, grimaced at it, but said nothing.

He's lucky he got it in a cup and not dumped in his lap. What would boiling water have done there? Elsa didn't think long on that.

Rosie was busying about doing silly, useless things with maddening efficiency, straightening discarded utensils, brushing down cleaned benches, grabbing the dishrag and flapping it at anything within reach.

Waiting, and watching her sister at work, long minutes passed. Elsa felt the sweat slip down under her chemise. She rubbed the spot, then when Southie's gaze followed, she dropped her hand and turned to Rosie. 'We have all we need of Pa's things to take to Frank now, Rosie,' she said quietly yet loud enough for Southie, behind her, to hear. She nodded encouragement to her sister.

Thankfully, Rosie responded in kind. She seemed to be quite collected now. 'Yes, you're right, Elsa. Frank will know what to do. Perhaps we should go soon.'

'Yes, we should.' Elsa turned back to Southie. 'What say you, Mr Southie?' she asked, and as she looked at him, he slumped, glassy-eyed, and fell over backwards off the chair. His tea spilled, and the empty pannikin rolled over his chest.

Both women froze. Then Elsa grabbed his cup and poured her tea into it. She swished it quickly with a finger then tossed the contents onto the floor, emptying it of any laudanum residue. Its smell was distinctive, and she didn't want it to linger. Rosie flung out her tea then used the dishrag to grab the kettle and pour hot water onto the coals in the stove.

'And on the floor here,' Elsa directed with a finger pointing over the puddle of tea staining the floorboards. She stared at Southie as steam misted the room. 'He's well and truly sleeping, but I don't want to risk staying any longer than we must.'

Rosie stared at her, agape. ‘You’re a scheming witch, Elsa,’ she said, a light in her eyes. ‘I never knew you to be so—’

‘Practical, inventive,’ Elsa finished for her, and stepped around the fallen man. ‘All this talk of bushrangers has made me quite daring.’

‘Elsa, the bushranger,’ Rosie said, in wonder, hands on her hips and her gaze on Southie’s prone body.

‘Hardly. Bushrangers had guns and such.’ Elsa bent to peer at Southie’s closed eyes.

‘A lady bushranger. Choice of weapon, laudanum.’

‘Not a time for funny, Rosie. We have to drag him away from the door. Help me. Let’s roll him over there.’

They’d loaded the cart in a frenzy. Elsa had taken most everything she could. Clothes, of course, and her spare pair of boots, the thin, ragged blankets, the flat mattresses, and any pillows still worth keeping. There wasn’t much when it came down to it, but the kettle, cups, and tea provisions had to come with them. A pot. They’d have to cook from time to time, but she didn’t know what. The match book—she ran her hand over the mantel and found it. She grabbed tins of flour and sugar, salt. Preserved fruit that Frank had so kindly ‘donated’ to her father.

Avoiding Southie’s body (he’d be all right, she’d given him only a little more tincture than prescribed for her father), she looked around the hut. Their father’s old rifle took her eye. It leaned against the ancient sideboard, a piece of furniture her mother had brought with her from Mt Gambier when they’d married. Elsa thought about the gun, knew that it worked because she’d been the one to clean it on Curtis Goody’s say-so. Bushranger, she’d be. She grabbed it, rested it against the table and searched the sideboard drawer for bullets already made. Only three, but at least they’d be dry. If she had to, she’d purchase powder and make

more ammunition. She stopped a moment. She knew her father's will was also in there. She rummaged around, found the thick envelope and held it up. 'This is coming with us, too, Rosie.'

They dropped the dirty dishrag over Southie's eyes—just in case—stripped off their pinafores and donned their cleaned dresses. Elsa snatched up the pinafores, and a blanket for across their knees, for when the sun would drop and the temperature with it.

Impatient to get away, Rosie marched for the cart. She pushed their belongings into it, shoving aside the shovel Henry had used, keeping things packed tight as Elsa handed her everything she'd gathered.

'I'll get newspaper for our nature calls,' Rosie piped, and ran back inside.

Elsa slid the rifle in behind the driver's seat and tucked the bullets and the will into a small wooden toolbox attached nearby to the floor of the cart. In it was a pot of axle grease tightly clamped shut, oily rags, a mallet, leather straps for something-or-other, and a tin of nails. All useful for something.

Rosie returned, threw a small bundle of newspaper into the cart and beckoned with a wave of her hand. 'Come along, the day is getting away. How much longer will he be unconscious?'

'Probably for the night.'

'We should untie his horse and let him run home,' Rosie said.

Elsa looked at the nondescript brown gelding, still saddled, standing quietly under a tree. 'Best not,' she said. 'But there is one more thing we have to do. I'll need you to help me.' She didn't wait for Rosie to get down but headed around towards the water trough. There on a timber stand was a barrel of water.

Rosie called, 'How are we going to manage that?'

'How are we going to manage without it? Come on, two of us can do it. Bring the cart.' Elsa climbed onto the stand and with the heels of her hands, hammered the lid down tight on the barrel.

Rosie gee-upped Peppin. Wrangling the barrel between them, they managed to hoist it onto the cart and slid it all the way along until it sat snug against the driver's bench. Rosie got back into the driver's seat, huffing and puffing, and muttering, 'Hurry up, hurry up.'

Elsa took one last look inside the hut. She stepped over Southie, only a moment fearful he would suddenly wake, and from stout nails on the far wall she grabbed her father's oilskin coat, as well as her own wide-brimmed and battered hat, and the hand-me-down blue woollen jacket she'd worn for years. She'd tie one of her brother's long leather belts—much too big for her—around her waist to keep the jacket closed because she'd lost buttons and never bothered to replace them.

Outside she took a moment to stare at the pair of graves, one fresh and one much older. She felt strange. She turned to look at the hut, squat, dilapidated—it appeared as if it was a life that was no longer hers.

Ezekiel Jones's letter was safely tucked into her bodice, and knowing she was on her way to meet him, the man who'd buried her brother, there was that odd flutter in her chest, again. Mr Jones might be one hundred and ten years of age, and not able to help at all. *Why on earth do I feel so unsettled about meeting him?*

Rosie's call distracted her. 'Up you get, Elsa. We're off to see that letter writer of yours.' Nothing unsettled about Rosie's thinking, it seemed.

Whether he was ancient or not, they were going to meet Mr Jones.

1896 Robe, South Australia

When Elsa Goody's father and brother George die in quick succession, she and her sister Rosie are in trouble. Pursued by an unpleasant suitor with dubious motivation, Elsa leaves for Victoria on the hunt for a fortune in gold coins that her brother has hidden.

If Elsa can find it, she will be able to save Rosie and herself from married slavery.

Their quest leads them on a cross-country journey to find the last man who saw her brother alive, Ezekiel Jones. But Elsa is not the only one looking for buried treasure. She and Rosie are beset by bushrangers and in the confusion, Elsa is accused of being an accomplice. Luckily not everyone believes that Elsa is a criminal. When she finally catches up with Ezekiel, it's clear that for him she can do no wrong.

But with everyone chasing her and bloody violence on the horizon, life is becoming increasingly complicated. Will she and Rosie ever manage to solve the mystery, find the gold and free themselves from a dark future?

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