

PROLOGUE

QUEENSLAND, 1881

Seated on his customary log by the camp fire, George Wakefield recited the old nursery rhyme slowly, the methodical cadence of his Midlands accent lending added force to the words.

*'Baa baa Black Sheep,
Have you any wool?
Yes, sir, yes, sir,
Three bags full;
One for the master,
One for the dame,
And one for the little boy
Who lives down the lane.'*

Having completed his recitation, he leaned forward – elbows on knees – and gazed down at his six-year-old son, cross-legged on the ground beside him. The look in the boy's eyes was one of expectancy, but also mystification. Young James had heard the nursery rhyme often – he'd heard many a nursery rhyme from his father in the past – but this time when he'd joined in, knowing it off by heart as he did, he'd been silenced.

'No, no, Jimmy,' his father had said. 'Listen very carefully to the words, each and every one of them, for I'm about to explain to you their meaning. You're of an age

to learn now.’ And then he’d started his recitation all over again with even greater deliberation.

Now the wide-eyed boy stared up at his father in wordless anticipation. He was about to learn something. James liked to learn things.

‘Who do the three bags go to, Jimmy?’ George asked.

Oh that part was easy. ‘The master and the dame and the little boy,’ he answered.

‘And who do you think they are?’

Not so easy. Not so easy at all. What did his father mean? James was confused. He shook his head.

‘I’ll tell you a story,’ George said in answer to his son’s understandable bewilderment. ‘Hundreds of years ago, way back in the Middle Ages, England’s King Edward needed to finance his wars. So he raised the tax on wool something terrible. Sheep and wool were of great value in those days, you see, very important to the country’s economy.’

George grinned knowingly, he was a shearer after all. ‘I suppose that proves some things never change, eh? Wool’s as valuable as ever it was, and probably always will be.’ He gazed about at the typical outback bushland. ‘Don’t know what this country would be without it.’

‘Anyway,’ he went on, getting back to his story, ‘these hefty taxes were most unfair to those on the land. For every bale of wool sold, a third of the money went to the King, a third went to the Church – of course you’ve always got to keep the Church happy,’ he added with a touch of cynicism, ‘and a third went to the poor shepherd who’d done all the hard work.’

He gave his knee a self-congratulatory slap as he summed up. ‘So there you have it, Jimmy lad, the master and the dame and the little boy are the King and the Church and the shepherd, that’s who. “Baa Baa Black Sheep” is a very, very old nursery rhyme, son, and like many a nursery rhyme it has a hidden meaning.’

James, fascinated, was about to speak. But there was more to come.

‘And do you want to know why the sheep is *black*?’ his father asked meaningfully.

The boy nodded. Yes, he certainly did.

‘Back then black cloth was popular . . .’ George paused, giving the matter a moment’s thought, he wanted to get things right. ‘. . . probably for funerals, there was a lot of death around in those days. But black dye was hard to come by, which made black cloth very expensive. And what do you think that meant?’

A telling pause as father and son’s eyes remained locked.

‘It meant black wool could be taxed more heavily,’ George said, ‘that’s what it meant. No need for black wool to be dyed, see?’

James finally gave voice. He had the answer. ‘So the black sheep were the most valuable ones,’ he announced triumphantly, delighted that he now understood the nursery rhyme with such clarity. He’d never seen a black sheep himself. He only wished he could. Perhaps they didn’t have black sheep in Australia.

‘Aha! That’s what they *say* . . .’ George held up a staying hand in order to halt the boy’s assumption. ‘But there’s another point of view altogether.’

Once again James fell silent.

‘Black cloth may have been popular,’ George said, ‘but there were other colours that also found favour, particularly with the ladies . . .’ He wasn’t actually sure about this detail and wished to be fair. ‘Or so I would reckon upon, knowing ladies as I do.’ It was true, he had known quite a few ladies in his time, and he doubted feminine tastes had changed even over several hundreds of years. Ladies liked a spot of colour.

‘But black wool *cannot* be dyed,’ he declared, this time with absolute certainty. ‘Black wool can produce only

black cloth. In which case the black sheep might well be the *least* valuable.'

In the gathering dusk, George's eyes searched those of his son, seeking the intelligence he knew lay within. James was a bright boy.

'So which is it do you think, Jimmy?' he asked. 'Is the black sheep the most valuable in the flock, or is he the least valuable of them all when his wool goes to market?'

James knew he was being put to the test, and having no wish to be found wanting gave the matter serious consideration.

'I suppose it depends upon the demand of the day, Pa,' he said after a pause. 'Whether people want black or whether they want colour.' An intelligent answer, but James had more to say. 'Although if the person who *owns* the sheep is really smart, he might *control* the market. He might *tell* the people what they want. You've always said people like to have a leader.'

George gave a loud, proud guffaw. He had indeed said just that. *People are like sheep, son*, he'd said, *they need a leader*.

'Good boy,' he applauded, 'good answer.' *My son will go far*, George thought.