

# PART 1

*Victoria, 1915*

A MONTH BEFORE HER BANISHMENT to *The Ranges* Stella Winterson stood feeding their horses distractedly in the stables when foreman John Blake happened to saunter by.

He pointed at her mother's horse, 'Don't worry about overdoing it, miss. She's been looking a bit on the skinny side lately.'

'That's how it looks to me too,' she answered as they fell to discussing the lack of rain and the poor quality of the feed, Horsehead Creek's parched state and the patches of Scotch Thistle beginning to spring up about the place.

Blake was about forty, she reckoned, a stout, cheerful man whose natural dignity touched everything he did. Kind-hearted and ever considerate, the bachelor was admired by all for the particular affinity he had with animals. He helped deliver horses of their foals and fussed over the sheep at lambing time, being known to wander paddocks in the middle of the night with a rifle over his shoulder to ward off wild dogs and foxes. Their own dogs followed him around the property like he was their father.

'Hard times all round and at this time of year when we should've had all our rain,' he said, pinching his eyes hopefully at the sky. 'What'll you be doing with yourself from now on?'

'I'm not sure,' she said. 'Maybe something in town.'

'I think Mr Winterson will be laying off another man soon. Not that there's many of us left. But with not much of a harvest to come this summer, if any at all, what reason will there be to keep everyone on?'

'Probably none,' she conceded.

'That's the one thing the war might be good for, offering employment. The only thing.'

‘You’ll stay on here though, I’m sure.’

‘I’m not worried about my position, miss,’ he said. ‘A property this size, Mr Winterson could never manage it on his own. At the very least he’d need two men.’

‘Then there’s no reason to worry.’

‘It’s hard times no question. Everyone’s tightening the belt and the storekeepers in town are getting stingy about who they let buy on a handshake. I’ve never seen so many terrible-looking horses in town neither. It’s always the poor old animals that get looked after last.’

‘I suppose we can only do what’s best for them, can’t we? And you certainly do that here,’ she said.

She thought that if it came to it, he’d choose a four-legged friend over a two-legged one any time.

‘I’ve always done my best,’ he said.

‘There’s no question about that,’ she answered.

But the conversation had Blake thinking. ‘It’s not just the animals,’ he went on. ‘This drought, no rain last year, no rain this, everything drying out like it is, it shrinks people just like it does the livestock. Not just how they look, but what’s inside them. They’re getting suspicious and mean. Have you seen how every gate gets shut now, every door locked? There’s fear, that’s what it is. That people who are on their last legs will go chasing after those whose pantries are full.’

‘But no one’s actually starving yet.’

‘Not in body,’ he said. ‘But in mind. There’s a time coming if it doesn’t rain soon. Some stores in town will shut their doors. Then their workers will be let go. Then there’s no money coming in and what do you do? Most will go away and look for work elsewhere. Or they’ll put on the uniform. The ones that stay will make enemies of friends. Bitterness will grow. That thing inside them will make them do things they never would otherwise.’

‘What things?’

Blake might have been gazing far off into the distance, such was the look in his eye. ‘We had a boy wander into the property the

other day. I don't know who he was. I suppose he was looking for work like others. For a minute I thought he might be a hawker but he had nothing with him. He came in through the gate on an old pony. An awful-looking animal with a sagging belly. But the boy had a hungry look about him too. I was a little ways down the track so I didn't hear everything that was said, or what he wanted. Only what they said afterward.'

'What who said?' she asked, suddenly alert.

'Your father was there,' Blake said. 'And Billings, the oaf. All six feet plus of him and fifteen stone. No offence miss, but Mr Winterson thinks that when the hordes jump the fence it's going to be Billings that protects him. But one man won't protect you against that madness when it comes, whoever he is.'

'The boy, who was he?' she pressed.

'I didn't know him. I tell you miss, I felt sorry for him. I'm sure he didn't mean any harm. I could tell he had come for a reason, that look he had. He was arguing with Mr Winterson and Billings on the track.'

She felt her heart quickening. 'Did you get a good look at him yourself?'

'Not very well. I was further back, on the house side and near where the track takes the bend. But I could hear them and then see him in fits and starts as his pony wandered about, agitated like. You see that in horses when they know there's trouble afoot. There were raised voices, I did hear that, and then the boy was off his horse and there was some kind of dispute, argument.'

'Do you mean they were fighting?'

'I'd say so. Yes, they were. I went walking up to see what I could do but Mr Winterson shooed me off. Billings and this boy were wrestling on the ground then and you know how that would have gone, Billings being the size he is. But the boy must have given a good account of himself too because later when I saw Billings he had a good shiner over his eye and the devil of a temper to go with it.'

'Can you describe what he looked like, the boy? I think I might know him.'

Blake shrugged in apology. 'I didn't get the best of looks at him. But from what I saw, I'd say he was a bit taller than myself and like your age. A lean kind of boy. Brown hair.'

'Jasper!' she cried.

'I hope he wasn't too badly hurt then if he was a friend of yours, miss. At any rate, he left by his own steam and let's hope he's safe in his own house now.'

But she was already running to find her father — through the machinery shed, through the shearing shed and the house block, to the labourer's quarters and to the well. She ran down through the she-oaks along the track and then back to the stables to find John Blake gone. She started here and there, turned her head inside the laundry and every place she could think of until she got to the house.

Her father was in the kitchen. He half turned to her as she ran in.

'What did you do to him?'

'Who?'

'You know who. Jasper!'

'If you mean your friend the other day, he was trespassing.'

'He came here to see me!'

He turned fully to face her. 'Which he had no permission to do.'

'You set that man on him.'

'I set no one on him. He came onto Redlands. We sent him off it.'

'That stupid Billings bashed him! And you let him!'

'Watch your tongue. You won't talk to me like that.'

'I'll say whatever I like!'

The most fearful row ensued, a savage, ugly clash that reverberated through the house and beyond. Stella couldn't afterward recall what she'd said, shouted or screamed. She only remembered her father's reddening face looking fit to blow up as he thundered back at her with his hand raised like a vengeful god. Somewhere in between the shrieking voices and pushing bodies she remembered her mother fighting to prise herself between them, the scratch of a

fingernail going deep and him roaring and roaring before she felt the hard strike of something and found herself sprawled on the hard tiled floor.

Her head spun. There was blood on her lip. Blackness. And then she remembered nothing.