

MOSQUITO CREEK

Chapter 1

Charles Stanfield, the Mosquito Creek goldfield commissioner, shivered in his coat as he surveyed the floodwaters spilling to the north. The nature of the country both sides of the river, he knew, made it impossible to tell how far the flood might have run, how much territory it might have breached. All about here was his responsibility and he felt its weight keenly. He could afford no further black mark against him.

Behind him to the south, his eye caught eruptions of earth discarded by burrowing miners. Some hummocks already seemed old, smoothed by rains and trampled by countless restless feet, though the ground had been even and undisturbed less than a year ago. Further in his line of sight, scattered through the few remaining trees on the diggings were huts of crude wattle and daub alongside grey canvas tents, sore reminders of how far he was from home.

As he stared even further south, a craggy escarpment peered over the heads of dripping eucalypts in tired contemplation of the diggings. Where the escarpment sagged in a low trough, travellers and coaches were funnelled through into easier country and the goldfield below.

Stanfield shivered again, drawing his coat tighter about him.

‘Cold,’ his sergeant, Niall Kennedy, noted.

‘Yes.’

Several other policemen stood about idly as their superiors endeavoured to sum up the situation. One rested the stock of his rifle on the ground, using the weapon as a crutch before discovering how soft the ground was.

‘Water’s travelled a long way,’ the sergeant said.

‘Do you believe it will rise more yet?’

‘It might go a bit higher. But the ground here’s fairly high. I think we’ll be all right, sir.’

Stanfield held no great trust in any of his policemen but he considered Kennedy at least competent, one of the few with a dedication to his task.

‘Do we know how far the river is in flood?’

The policeman glanced around pensively, which was partly what Stanfield liked about him. There was no shooting off with the first thought, no puffing himself up. The sergeant tried conveying something of the truth of a situation. Kennedy was about forty, he supposed, getting old to be a trooper, but clean-shaven and with hard green eyes. Almost six foot tall and broad across the shoulders, he could move beyond the authority of his uniform if he needed to, though he was more inclined to look away before speaking, as if considering how many of his thoughts he could let go.

‘The road across to Wangaratta seems to be all right, they say. The same with Beechworth. Anything north of the river we won’t be able to get to.’ Kennedy pointed to the east. ‘The thing is, there’s all these weeks of rain we’ve had, and they’ve probably had more falling higher up in the mountains too. Melting all the snow. I’d say for the Murray to break like this they must have had even more rain out that way than we’ve had here. The other rivers and creeks pouring into it further up too, you’d think.’ He read the commissioner’s next question. ‘It might not go much higher here, but if it keeps on raining it’s not going to fall much either, for a spell. And that water from the north will have to fall back somewhere, to the river.’

‘So we might have to contend with this for a time yet,’ the commissioner said despondently.

‘I’d say that’s about it.’

‘You’ll keep me abreast of any news?’

‘I’ll see if there’s anything else to find out.’

‘Make sure now, won’t you?’

Kennedy nodded.

Commissioner Stanfield dismissed the others before turning in the direction of his hut. The muddy diggings were quiet enough and he could negotiate a path without any concern. When the first hopefuls ventured here from the central Victorian goldfields early in 1855, too late to take advantage of the great finds there but with still enough glint in their eyes to make the trek north-east, Mosquito Creek had quickly grown from a hundred strong to five hundred, to a thousand before two weeks were out. Swarming crowds picked over every likely pocket of earth, and as larger finds became rarer, impatience and tempers rose. New arrivals were blamed, ostracised, beaten. The little gold remaining was now swiftly running out, that much was clear-

The commissioner let himself into his hut, which he locked these days since Bendigo taught him the need. He shrugged rain from his coat before hanging it on an improvised hatstand. What remained of his fire had almost extinguished itself in the hearth so he stoked it back to life with kindling and twigs, listening to the spit and crackle of wood igniting. A millipede crept from a narrow tube of bark he'd tossed into the flames and he flicked it back into the fire, watching it sizzle and shrink into itself.

Stanfield was young; no older than twenty-five, one of the governor's *boy commissioners*. He stood straight and rigid, which made him appear even slighter, taller than his height of six feet. He wore the faintly sick, pallid look of all recently arrived from England, even though he had been in this country seven or eight months now, arriving at Mosquito Creek after a stint at Bendigo. His short brown hair was recently cut. A neatly trimmed moustache barely hid a white scar. His walnut-brown eyes surveyed the room without interest.

As frequently happened when he was alone, what memories he tried hardest to close out of his mind most commonly stepped forward to confront him.

He remembered being sixteen, lost in a book with thin, pencil-line illustrations of mechanical equipment and engines, his father stamping into the library and catching him unawares.

'What are you doing?'

His father might have run from somewhere. His hair was dishevelled, the loose folds of his jowly cheeks were red. There was a sharp smell about him.

And before Charles had time to answer, to respond in any way, his father strode forward and spat a sticky, burning gob into his face.

Pulling a chair to his desk, and staring at the unopened correspondence on it, a sick, bilious feeling began rising in Charles Stanfield, not for the first time since his arrival in the new country.